

## Bridge Over Troubled Water, Y Proposal Approved

What at first glance appeared to be a minor item on the Conservation Commission's agenda turned out to be a much more complicated issue, as dozens of Westporters turned up at Monday night's meeting to voice their opinions on a proposed bridge on the Westport Weston Family Y's 32-acre property at 14 Sunny Lane, part of the Camp Mahackeno site. The commission eventually approved the application 4-0, with some conditions.

For more than 50 years, there has been a pedestrian bridge spanning Poplar Plains Brook on the site. Though the age of the current bridge has been debated, people on both sides of the issue agree that the current structure, which was apparently ruined when a heavy vehicle attempted to drive across the bridge, is not safe and needs to be rebuilt.

They also agree that the current materials are environmentally hazardous. The CCA-treated wood currently in place has been exposed as a toxic chemical with carcinogenic effects, and therefore poses a potential risk to everyone using the bridge and may be leaching into the soil. But that's where the agreement ends.

The landowners, the Westport Weston Family Y, came to the Conservation Commission with a proposal for a bridge that seemed to be similar to the current structure, with the exception that it would be designed to support the weight

of both pedestrians and commercial vehicles.

The existing bridge measures 10-foot wide with a 30-foot span. It is currently below the 100-year flood mark. The new structure will be 12-foot wide with a 20-foot span, is 20 percent smaller in terms of square footage and will be set above the flood mark. The new bridge will also not require a central supporting post to be rooted in the brook as the present bridge does.

The bridge would allow campers, counselors and staff to cross over the waterway, and would also be able to support heavier vehicles, which Larry Weisman, counsel for the Family Y, said would only be used by two trucks each month: a truck that carries pool supplies and a garbage truck. The capability of the bridge supporting heavier vehicles would also allow emergency vehicles to cross the brook, should the need arise, said Y officials.

"There is no heavy traffic that is ever going to use this bridge, but it would not be prudent to build a bridge that's not capable of carrying that kind of traffic," said Weisman.

But the bridge's opponents argued that the differences in the structures are great, and that building it would have dire consequences. Sidney Kramer, chairman of Save Westport Now, addressing the commission, said, "The application before you today might seem trivial in this context, but I assure you, it is not trivial. Obviously there's an unstated agenda."

The agenda, bridge opponents say, really has to do with future plans for the proposed new site of the Westport Weston Family

Y. Elizabeth Flint, who lives on Rice's Lane, near the Mahackeno site, wondered why such a bridge was needed now, but was never needed before. "For over 50 years there has been no need for a bridge of this size or capacity," she said.

It was her feeling that construction of such a bridge would pave the way for future development, development that is likely, in her opinion, tied to future plans of the Westport Weston Family Y's proposed expansion on the Mahackeno site. "I resent the fact that the Y has been trying to approach this in a rather dubious manner," Flint said.

Y officials claimed that their plans for expansion at Mahackeno are not secret, but that those plans do not relate to the matter of building a new bridge. Rosemary Halstead, president of the Board of Directors for the Westport Weston Family Y, insisted that the bridge is merely "a professionally designed contemporary equivalent" of the current bridge. "It is rustic in design, unobtrusively sited, and fits naturally into its surroundings."

Allen Raymond, chairman of the Board of Trustees for the Westport Weston Family Y, insisted, "If the plans for the Y are not approved, we will still need that bridge."

Y officials and the Conservation Commission also reminded the public that any modifications to the use or design of the bridge, roadways leading to the bridge, fill or grading, all must be cleared by the commission. "The entire project that the Y is contemplating is north of Poplar

Plains Road. This bridge plays no role and has no function for the Y," said Weisman.

Brian Gold, another resident of Rice's Lane, argued that "usage grows to fill capacity." If you have a cluttered closet and then build newer, bigger closets, he said, the result is that you now have bigger cluttered closets. Likewise, if you build a bridge that will allow for more traffic, the result will be in more traffic.

Both Weisman and Halstead, however, insisted that this is not the case now, and they do not anticipate it becoming the case. "It is neither now, nor in the future conceived to be a bridge that will be used for frequent traffic flow. It is the very bridge that we would be proposing under any circumstances," said Halstead. "It's fiscally responsible for us to build a bridge that we know will not be damaged if someone currently takes vehicles across it."

Pam Weil, a member of the Conservation Commission, lent her support to that argument, saying, "If you're going to build something, why not prepare for the future for whatever contingency might come along?"

Another nearby resident, John Kennedy of Partrick Road, insisted that there are other alternatives to the proposed structure and that approving the bridge would set a bad precedent for what he called "gaming the system." In order to protect its own jurisdiction, Kennedy said, the commission must reject the application. Fellow bridge opponent Candace Savin supported Kennedy's notion, saying, "This project is one of historic proportion."

Answering Kennedy's question of possible alternatives to the Y's proposal, Weisman said, "I agree that there are many, many feasible alternatives. I don't think any of them is prudent." It would not be prudent, he said, to build anything less.

Weisman continued, "It is also not true, despite the eloquent words that you've heard, that you need to consider the operational decisions that the Y made or is about to make when you look at this project. That's not your [the Conservation Commission's] purview. Whether we use this bridge to stand on, jump off, to drive things across, has nothing to do with what you're charged with looking at."

While approximately 10 of the night's speakers were in opposition to the Y's proposal, Weisman presented the commission with a sheet of paper signed by 52 people (which grew to 53 people when Michael Laux publicly added his name to the list later in the evening) all in support of the Y's bridge proposal. He then asked those people to stand, revealing that the majority of the meeting's attendees were there in support of the Y's plans.

"Comments about the Y's intentions in our recent letter to your commission such that we're being disingenuous are not reflective of the dedicated, devoted and committed Westport citizens who are here tonight working so hard to bring a new, beautiful Family Y to the Westport community in which you and I live," said Raymond. "We are before your commission to replace a little bridge and it is no shell game. The bridge has been damaged and must be

replaced. We need that bridge for the kids at camp this summer."

And yet Chet Harlow, another longtime Westporter, felt that the impact of this bridge means much more than the mere safety of Camp Mahackeno's campers. "Things have changed. Westport has grown. It is not only a bridge, it's a sign of the times," he said.

Wrapping up the evening's speakers was Halstead who reminded the commission, "What you have before you is an application from a private property owner to replace an existing bridge that's integral to the running of a business that's been in operation for 51 years."

When all was said and done, and despite close to two hours of debate, the Conservation Commission unanimously decided to approve the Y's application to build the bridge with minor amendments to the original application, including stipulations about construction, saying that the Y must avoid construction of the bridge during periods of heavy rain, and stipulations about removal of the current materials.

In general, the commissioners felt that the environmental impact was not significant and that the Y would have to return to the town for any future alterations or change of use.

"Yes, there's an impact," said the commission's Chairman Lee Starr. "I think that the impact is not substantial."

Commissioner Bob Fox went one step further, "I feel that the new bridge actually represents an improvement in terms of environmental impact."