

Grant special permit

The following was written as an open letter to the Westport Planning and Zoning Commission:

Like most Westporters I've followed the YMCA location debate for many years. I've read the countless letters to the editor, watched some of the P&Z hearings, and perused both sides' web sites — and I've formed my own opinion that I think might in fact represent the "silent majority" in this debate — so here goes:

1. The YMCA provides a service that Westport desperately needs, so referring to it as the Westport Community Center would be far more accurate than trying to classify it as a health club. For almost 40 years my family has taken full advantage of its programs — as have based on its membership rolls about a third of all Westport residents.

2. The current facility's best days have long passed. It's a labyrinth of tired areas — old gyms and dated workout rooms, gross locker rooms, and a pool that I think all of us from the 1960s on forward learned to swim in.

3. Having the Y downtown in its current location is no picnic. There's no where to park — especially for those highly prized and oversubscribed weekend activities — and picking up our little water rats after practice is an example of how Westport could benefit from congestion pricing.

I don't think many people in either "camp" would argue with those three points — especially if you actually use the Y on a regular basis — and aren't one of those who like to shout but aren't sure why you're shouting. So let's try some more:

4. In an ideal world we'd pick a centrally located easily accessible parcel of land and let the Y rebuild. We've all watched as countless sites have been debated — but none have ever officially been put forth as a suitably executable recommendation — so hoping that some place like Baron's South will miraculously

present itself is wishful thinking but not reality.

5. The only other piece of land the Y owns in Westport is Mahackeno. I don't know the history but I do know that I was a camper there in the early 70s — so it's my guess that there's no one who lives within a mile of those 33 acres who didn't know it was owned by the Y before they moved in.

So all rhetoric and posturing aside — I think this comes down to a simple question:

- If you want the Y to remain in Westport, we need them to be able to be able to relocate and rebuild on their Mahackeno property.

- If you want the Y to leave, force them to stay in their current location.

This is a vote about the Y and its future in Westport — plain and simple. You can't say you support the Y but not Mahackeno — there are no other options. Say it to yourself again — there are no other options. You either want the Y to stay or you want to force the Y to go.

To be honest, I'm not passionate about Mahackeno as the answer. It's further from my home, and conceptually I like the idea of having it centrally located. But I am passionate about keeping the Y in Westport and if the only way to do that is to put it at Mahackeno — then I'm for it. While perhaps not ideal — the current plan does call to preserve far more open space than if it becomes yet another over developed subdivision (you do know of course that keeping it status quo is no longer an option) — and those who refer to the intersection of Route 33 and the Merritt Parkway as "rural" aren't fully opening their eyes, or their ears.

So P&Z Commissioners — I hope you do the right thing and grant this special permit. Worst case scenario — in a few years we have a new Y on a sliver of the Mahackeno footprint. Best case scenario — it forces the town's hand and Baron's South finally becomes an option. Saying "no" will give the Y no leverage and force it elsewhere — which

is an end result that would be extremely disappointing to our "silent majority."

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P.S. Can we all agree that win or lose we'll have no superfluous taxpayer-sapping sore loser lawsuits? Wishful thinking perhaps — but it'd be best for all of us if we can all finally move forward.