

If you really want to feel good about yourself and acknowledge your membership as a citizen of planet Earth, do yourself a favor and pick up one piece of garbage. Doing this everyday would be wonderful, but doing it April 22 is a good start.

Thanks in advance.

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'Disappointing'

It's disappointing and disturbing to hear opponents of the Mahackeno Y project describe the Y as a mere "commercial fitness club," when it means so much more to many Westporters. My family, living in Westport for 21 years, has used the Y more as a community center than as a fitness club. Although the Y is of course a place where members can indeed work out and live a healthier lifestyle, it is above all a non-profit community center where all generations can participate in a variety of activities. I would encourage Planning and Zoning Commission members to look at what the Y does for the entire community and grant it the special use permit it deserves.

For my family, these activities have ranged from health and athletic activities to community service opportunities and events. I can still remember my first experience at the Y when we moved to Westport in 1987. As a mother of a nine-month-old infant, I signed up for an aerobics class. To this day, I remember trying to get to this class by 9 a.m. with an infant, stroller, and portable play pen all in tow. Of course, the only parking I could find was in the town lot behind the church. I then proceeded to the Y building, winding my

way through narrow corridors and negotiating several sets of staircases, with no elevators in sight to arrive at my destination. This was no easy feat, and unfortunately this path to the exercise room hasn't changed in the 21 years since my first aerobics class.

Nonetheless, I fell in love with the Y. The instructors were great and the women in the babysitting room were very caring. It was a comfortable family place. As our family of three increased to a family of six, we took advantage of the numerous opportunities the Y offered. To start, all of our four children took swim lessons in their early years until they had accomplished what we, as parents, felt was a necessary life skill. Three of our four children became members of the Water Rats swim team, where they developed for the first time the sense of what it was like to be part of a team. They also learned that the only expectation by anyone (coaches and teammates alike) was that they give their best effort. It was not only about results. In fact, their ribbons have been put away in boxes long ago, but the philosophy of caring, honesty, respect and responsibility is truly their memory from their swim team days.

When our children decided they wanted to try gymnastics, karate, music, art, and basketball, where else could we go? The Y offered all of these activities. With four children who have a variety of interests, this was a mother's dream. For our family this was Westport's community center. Our children have all attended Youth Fun Nights at the Y. They looked forward to getting together with friends to swim, play basketball, throw themselves against a Velcro wall and eat pizza. We celebrated many birthday parties at the Y as well. All of our children attended summer camp at Mahackeno and our oldest

child was a counselor there for three years.

However, with everything the Y has to offer, unfortunately, its antiquated and non-regulation-sized gyms do not allow for our son who plays basketball on a Y travel team, or my husband who coached our daughter's travel team to play games on their home court at the Y. Our kids on the swim team were limited to a small number of home meets because of the size of the pool and its seating. To me, after seeing all of the hard work the kids and their coaches put in, they at least deserve facilities that are regulation sized.

As our family became involved in the community over the years, the Y was always an integral part of anything Westport. I served on the inaugural board of First Night Westport/Weston. Our headquarters that first year were at the Y. Our success as a First Night organization depended on the involvement of other non-profit groups, and the Y was the first organization to sign up.

As a Girl Scout troop leader, I was able to hold meetings at the Y when our regular meeting locations at the schools became unavailable to us. Our troop also experienced its first local camp outing at Mahackeno. As an organizer of a Girl Scout event to boost teambuilding skills for our middle school aged scouts, the Y again offered us their facility.

When as president of the Young Woman's League, I needed to find a meeting place for our group, as our regular spot wasn't available due to a snow day, the Y offered us their meeting room. For several years, the WYWL also held its annual Easter Egg Hunt at Camp Mahackeno.

None of the above mentioned non-profit organizations paid a dime to enjoy the Y's generosity. If this isn't the definition of what a non-profit community center is, then I don't know what is!

I cannot imagine what West-

port would do without its Y. Where will all the young families in town go to help their children learn to swim, to give them unstructured gym, swim, and basketball time, and to learn the importance of being a part of a community? Will future generations of Westport youth be denied the experience of day camp at Mahackeno or scout camping there because the land has become a housing development? What will Westport do without its community center? To me, it's an unfathomable thought.

So why build at Mahackeno? Serving on the Y Board of Directors for nine years, I know it is our last and only option. We need to move forward and build the Y at Mahackeno, if we want to keep our community center alive in Westport. At my first directors' meeting, I remember seeing the model of our proposed building at Baron's South. I also remember the many discussions and hope we had at the time. We were excited to include a senior center in our plan and looked forward to having more intergenerational programs.

However, I cannot forget the disappointment when that hope was shot down by the town administration and we were left to keep searching for an alternate site. We were told in no uncertain terms that the Y would not be allowed on town owned land. Nine frustrating years later, that idea is again being proposed. Our board members have spent countless hours over thirteen years searching for alternate locations, and we have discovered the answer to our dilemma was right under our nose at Mahackeno.

What will building a new facility at Mahackeno bring to the town? A little more traffic to the area near the Meritt Parkway at exit 41? Possibly, but it's nothing new to many of us already living in a community whose geographical layout out is far from ideal.

Living near Bedford Middle School and Staples High School, our family has experienced some increased traffic volume, a result of having these 2 large schools near each other. However, we don't notice the few extra moments it might take us to get elsewhere in town. Instead we are thankful for the beautiful schools our children attend, as well as the nearby Wakeman fields, which provide recreation for everyone.

What about the parking at the new Y? It's something we should embrace, for safety reasons alone. When attending the current downtown Y, I still mumble under my breath as I struggle to find parking. However, more importantly, I worry for the safety of the children who dart out in between large sized cars and SUV's on Church Lane on their way to their practices. I look forward to the day when children and adults alike can be dropped off safely, and everyone can easily attend their chosen activity without winding through narrow corridors and up and down staircases that aren't accessible to all.

Ultimately, what a new Y at Mahackeno will bring is a place where members can gather to feel a sense of community, enjoy the outdoors, and participate in the many diverse activities the Westport Weston Family Y has to offer.

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Founding board member of First Night Westport/Weston
Former Service Unit Manager of the Westport Girl Scouts
Former Chair of the Westport Y's Faces of Achievement