

Westport Minuteman Editorial

Field of Dreams

March 20, 2008

When the Town of Westport acquired Baron von Langerdorff's property at Compo Road South and Post Road East a decade ago, squirrels, marmots, birds and a few deer were its only occupants.

Since then, the perfume baron's rolling woodlands have become a field of dreams, with Westporters proposing myriad municipal uses, including a new arts center, a new headquarters for the Westport Historical Society, and a new police station. There were even those who favored leaving the property as open space, for exclusive use by the squirrels, marmots and birds, and the humans who might want to commune with them.

While all these ideas for the property known as Baron's South have had their proponents, two proposals currently under public discussion have received the most attention: a new headquarters for the Westport Weston Family Y, and housing for town employees and senior citizens.

Currently the Westport Center for Senior Activities, a thriving, beautifully constructed and landscaped building on a corner of the property, is the only development at Baron's South.

Last week, First Selectman Gordon Joseloff released the results of a survey mailed in December to seniors and members of the town's workforce, including police, firefighters and teachers, that Joseloff said demonstrate "an undeniable need" to expand housing options in town. At the end of the survey, the engineering firm Weston & Sampson recommended placing housing at Baron's South.

Also last week, 10 members of the Westport Representative Town Meeting sent out a statement that revisits the idea of locating the Family Y at Baron's South, rather than building it at Camp Mahackeno, the controversial proposal currently being reviewed by the Planning & Zoning Commission.

Neither of these ideas is a sure thing, and in a sense they will be competing with each other. Joseloff has supported placing housing at Baron's South, but the RTM members who spoke out last week - not to mention an unknown number of Westporters who, for various reasons, are vehemently opposed to the Mahackeno proposal - will push for locating a scaled-down Family Y at the site.

Locating the Family Y at Baron's South is not a new idea, of course. Officials of the Y broached the idea during First Selectwoman Diane Farrell's administration, but Farrell wasn't keen on it, and public comment at the time was generally opposed, with critics arguing it wouldn't be proper for a private entity such as the Y to be using public property.

The future of Baron's South and the Family Y will be settled at the P&Z, or in the courts. As to the latter possibility, we were amused to read one of the arguments from the 10 RTM members who weighed in last week to support a Family Y at Baron's South: "Public sentiment, now bitterly divided, would unite strongly behind this downtown solution."

Considering that it took a lawsuit even to build the senior center at Baron's South, for Westporters to unite on locating the Family Y there might only happen in a field of dreams.