

**Westport News 03.26.08**  
**Letter to the Editor**

**Smokescreen**

Last week I read a New York Times article about Westport, and I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The article talked about a project that "is dividing the town in two;" a project plagued by lawsuits filed by angry neighbors because they view it as unnecessary, out of place, and an affront to open space. No, I wasn't reading about the Westport Weston Family Y proposal to build at Mahackeno. The article was dated March 12, 1989. It reported the hostility caused by the playground at Compo Beach.

When my wife and I first considered moving here, in 1991, our Realtor took us on a tour of Westport. She showed us the playground because she knew we were planning to start a family, and laughed when she told us how controversial it had been. I had no idea that 17 years later I would find myself in the middle of a similar controversy.

For those of you who enjoy the playground but fear the Mahackeno project, I'll note that the playground designer had built 500 playgrounds in 25 states before coming to Westport, where he faced his first lawsuit. Fear and litigation are part of our legacy, but they don't need to be part of our future.

As old-timers know, every major project in Westport's recent history -- from the acquisition of Longshore, to the construction of Bedford Middle School, to the development of the playground at Compo Beach -- has been met with such opposition. And yet, these are some of the jewels of Westport that Realtors show off to newcomers. These are the things that make Westport so desirable, and yes, these are the things that increase property values throughout Westport. All of them are in residential areas. And none of them are downtown.

I mention this because there is a persistent group that asserts that the Y "belongs" downtown. Ten RTM members went so far as to claim downtown is the "spiritual" center of Westport. I respectfully submit that the

spirit of Westport is embodied in our people, and most of us are as happy at the margins as in the center. I have never heard a sunbather at Compo or a golfer or swimmer at Longshore complain that they were just too far from downtown. And, judging from the children and seniors I see on the beach in the summer, they don't seem to have too much trouble getting there, either.

So, after all the hearings that convinced the local and state authorities that the plan is environmentally sound, we now come down to the last two fears: traffic and property values. The traffic expert hired by the Y, who has done surveys for many local municipalities, showed that with mitigation activities proposed by the Y, the impact on traffic in that area will be 40-80 seconds under worst case conditions if the Y membership increases by 33 percent. The opposition has come out against traffic lights as strongly as they oppose sewer connections. One might ask if the rest of us should suffer because this group opposes the type of mitigation efforts suggested by the Connecticut DOT, even before a Y at Mahackeno was proposed. We can mitigate most of the impact of the new Y, just as we can improve traffic tie-ups today. Some people just don't like the solutions.

The presentation to P&Z given by an expert appraiser indicates a worst-case property value impact of less than 5 percent on the houses adjacent to the Mahackeno property on Sunny Lane. That's exactly two houses, and one of them is bank-owned after a foreclosure. Despite the fears of other neighbors, history tells us that the net result will be positive for them, too. Can anyone honestly claim that the playground at Compo lowers property values in that area? For every potential buyer that shies away from a child's delight or family recreation facility, surely there is another who would welcome the chance to walk to such a destination.

With all that in mind, I ask you to remember why you like living in Westport. Take a drive past Compo and its well-used playground, and imagine how many children -- and parents -- have enjoyed it over the years. Take a stroll around Longshore. Visit our wonderful middle school and ask whether these projects were all worth

the effort. Their supporters overcame fear and litigation to help make Westport what it is today.

Then take a walk around downtown, and imagine just a few more shops or restaurants behind the familiar facade of the old Y. Stop in at the Y and take a good look at the architectural model and plans for the Mahackeno project. You'll see enhanced recreational opportunities for children and the disabled, and unlike the current Y, the ceilings at Mahackeno will actually be high enough to allow gymnasts over 5'1" tall. This isn't a facility for elite athletes -- it is a place to let everyone improve their health, skills and safety while continuing the programs that benefit us all, like extensive lifeguard training. While you're there, note the care that was taken in its design to make it minimally intrusive to the neighbors, and the fact that it will be the first public facility in Westport built to the LEED standards of the U.S. Green Building Council.

Finally, take a walk around the Mahackeno site, as I did recently with the P&Z commissioners. Note that after construction of the new Y there will still be well over 20 acres of camp and woods left untouched (and many more would be untouched if the Y were allowed to connect to the sewer instead of needing this space for a septic leeching field).

Now ask yourself, do I want to help bring this magnificent showcase of a green facility to Westport to provide services that benefit so many? Or, do I want to be part of the group that turns the Mahackeno site into a housing development and runs the Y out of Westport? Despite the smokescreen put up by the loyal opposition, there is no downtown solution and the Y cannot continue to run a deficit at the old facility.

It really is that simple.

***Adrian Bowles***  
**Westport**