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Letter to the Editor

### The 'Gang of 10'

The Westport Family Y's Mahackeno proposal is now before the P&Z, and the complaints are raining down like dead fish. The warnings are increasingly dire. The end is near. Mahackeno is coming. Lock up your wives and daughters! The signs, which pop up like weeds at some of Westport's worst performing intersections (the irony of which shouldn't be lost on the P&Z) strike a similarly apocalyptic note, albeit with unintended humor. "Mahackeno = fish, kills + pollution" reads one sign, an unneeded comma punctuating the grim message of impending ecological doom to comic effect. Another sign helpfully points north with the words "Cut Thru to Mahackeno." I already know about the cut thru, but thanks just the same.

In a week marked by political hypocrisy on the scale of Greek tragedy, the assault on the Family Y hit a new low. Ten people submitted a statement to the press in which, donning their official RTM hats, they dismissed the Mahackeno plan on the usual grounds. The traffic and pollution will turn beautiful open space into Beijing West. And the things the Y wants, after all, are immoderate, excessive, out of whack. Their solution? Keep the Y central and accessible and shrink it to fit onto Baron's South. Have they been sleeping the past 10 years? Rip Van Winkle slept on the banks of the Hudson, not the Saugatuck. But his awakening was marked by less denial of the facts and certainly by less chutzpah.

Whom does this Gang of 10 purport to represent? The people who elected them? I support the Y's move to Mahackeno and no one contacted me to ask my opinion.

I surely don't recall giving my RTM reps carte blanche at the voting booth to misrepresent their opinions as my own.

These "representatives" (and I use the term loosely) claim that the town is "deeply divided." On what basis do they make this claim? Based on letters like theirs? Most of the bad press comes from the same quarters – Mahackeno neighbors and the usual contrarians who organize around the idea that all change is bad and any compelling evidence to the contrary must be ignored. Then again, anyone with MapQuest can figure out that three of the 10 RTM reps are Mahackeno neighbors, a fourth wins the Mahackeno trifecta, (close to the junction of 57 and 33, Lees Dam and the Saugatuck); and a fifth has a view of the Merritt so exclusive, he can almost reach out and touch the cars as

they whiz by or stand still. I guess he prefers to see them whiz by.

I have no clue why the other five joined them, but the 10 collectively have no authority. One of our local papers, in a stroke of editorial folly, not only gave the group opinion space but also front-page coverage, the investigative nature of which was so subtle, it eluded the reader. After all, these are 10 people who oppose the Y's move who happen to be on the RTM. They aren't 10 RTM members acting in an official capacity. Yet they don their RTM hats, the better to beguile the public, ignoring years of history regarding the Y's Strategic Planning process and second guessing the judgment and motives of the Y's Board of Directors, who collectively have 1,000 years of public service behind them. They falsely contend that the Y's board has failed in its due diligence. But the specs for a new Y in 2008 are essentially the same as they were 10 years ago when my tenure on the board ended, and are based on years of research and planning. My kids who used to be Water Rats are in college and I have let my membership lapse, so I can hardly be accused of having a vested interest beyond my deep desire not to let Westport become Pottersville. I've been watching the public drama unfold in the meantime, but the spectacle of these 10 people misusing their public office (and the newspaper's failing to pick up on it) forced me off the sidelines.

Particularly odious is the suggestion by these self-anointed experts that the Y Board of Directors is baiting local land-use bodies with an unseen (can you say "phony"?) contract for the sale of the existing property "said to be executed to generate building funds, but one may ask was it also done to leverage approvals from town boards and generate empathy from residents?" One may indeed ask. If one has been asleep for 10 years, it is permissible to offer up such questions as proof that one is out of touch with reality. The Y doesn't really need millions of dollars, after all, in order to build a new building. The supposed "contract" is a clever ruse to get the P&Z to cave in to the Y's evil plot to destroy life as we know it in Westport with a new and improved facility, including a Satanic childcare center, a fetid 50-meter pool complex and treacherous trails for hiking by would-be evil-doers and eco-terrorists in training.

Can a Y even fit on Baron's South, as the authors suggest? I'm certain it can. If we get rid of most of the stuff the Y really needs and squeeze what's left in with a really big shoehorn. Would the neighbors who sacked the first Baron's South plan welcome the Y with open arms, or at least take a long nap during construction? Would the traffic objections raised 10 years ago go away? The

study by Weston and Sampson Engineers (the same study cited by the 10 as evidence of that property's continued feasibility as a Y location) concludes that "development of any kind will be limited by the access points, existing traffic congestion, and traffic lights; therefore less intensive development should be a priority for the site." Hmmm I wonder what they mean by "less intensive." And where is the Post Road access promised by these 10? It doesn't exist. Maybe they dreamed it.

I've been conscious the past 10 years, driving the same roads that the authors of this letter believe would offer easy access to a Y at Baron's South. Who are they kidding? There is little will in this town to improve any intersection ever. You can't lay the blame for that with the Y. Many in our town suffer from a pernicious and entrenched belief in a fantasy world that no longer exists and may never have existed in which Westport is a sleepy little New England town in the manner of Peyton Place where every family has one driver and one car and all the stores are Mom & Pop establishments where you can still buy a cream soda for a nickel.

Like it or not, a lot of traffic flows through this town. The Merritt Parkway can sometimes look like a used car lot. But hey, the Boston Post Road at the intersection of Route 33 is no picnic either. How about the intersection of Cross Highway and North Avenue? Or the junction of 57 and 33? Or the dangerous intersection of 57 and 136? All are in need of remediation. The Y hasn't cornered the market on congestion. Westport has eight schools, tons of shopping and lots of cars. Some traffic moves through town to avoid 95 and the Merritt. Some of it comes to visit. But much of it stays right here. Shouldn't our elected representatives focus their attention on mediating the existing traffic hang-ups and improving the quality of life for all their constituents? Holding up the Y for another 10 years isn't going to make the people or the cars or the traffic go away. Baron's South seemed like a good idea 10 years ago while you guys were sleeping. Now it's time to wake up and catch up to reality. The next time you run for office, we won't be sleeping.

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