

Family Y must move to Mahackeno, or close its doors

BY RICK BENSON

I have lived in Westport nearly 30 years, long enough that I have had to build the Compo Beach Playground twice. My reward for getting the approvals in 1988 and defending the approvals in 1989 was to be appointed, then elected to, the Planning and Zoning Commission. I have subsequently served as Vice Chair of the Conservation Commission and on the Board of Finance. I have seen my share of Westport land use controversies, nearly all of which blow over two days after project approval. I appreciate your time and dedication in holding these extensive public hearings and I applaud your service to the Town.

I have been a quiet, but long term supporter of the Y's search for a new facility. I did their first site search study 13 years ago, before the committee the Jo Fuchs-Luscomb chaired, and now serve as a Trustee of the Y. I was the proposer of a community service complex at Baron's South more than 12 years with the Y serving as the cornerstone, but with space for the United Way, Red Cross, Chamber of Commerce, Senior Center, and other local not-for profits. The idea never caught on and as you know, several studies later, several selectman later, two Town plans of development later — Baron's South is now off limits for the Y and still being inventoried for "future municipal uses."

I have always been dismayed at why our town has rejected a public-private partnership with the Y which has been done successfully in so many other communities across the country.

I have three key points to make:

1. A reminder of three prior Special Permit uses in residential districts which were controversial, but ultimately approved under the broad powers of the P&Z to promote and protect the public health and welfare of the community.

2. A reminder that the Westport Weston Family Y is the largest non-governmental provider of services in our community. The loss of the Y to our community would certainly not be in keeping with your authority to promote the general health and welfare of our Town.

3. A reminder that there are no alternative sites in Westport, no public or private sites which are appropriate other than Mahackeno. Without approval of this proposed move to Mahackeno, there will be no Family Y in our community.

Let me elaborate:

The three prior approvals I refer to are the 1988 Compo Beach Playground, the construction of Temple Israel and its subsequent major expansion, and the construction of the Conservative Synagogue on Hills Point Road. All three were special permit applications in residential districts. All three projects

But the truth is that if this application for the move to Mahackeno is not approved, presumably with conditions, there will be no Y in Westport. The Main Street building has been sold, there is no clause that allows the Y to cancel the contract. It's move soon, or close the doors. As a Trustee I approved the fiscally sound decision to sell the building. The Y has outgrown the building, it is so expensive to maintain that the Y is losing a lot of money at that location, and short of vacating the site for 2 to 3 years, there is no way to cure all the code and habitability issues, but there is no room for a 50 meter pool which is what the community wants and deserves.

had to be located in residential districts as they were larger than 10,000 SF and therefore prohibited in commercial districts. All three projects were bitterly opposed by neighbors. All three projects, shortly after completion, were embraced by their neighborhoods and have had a positive impact on not only property values but on quality of life in Westport. April 26 marks the 19th anniversary of the court decisions to overturn the appeals to the Compo Playground approvals. That playground proved so popular we wore it out and had to replace it in 2006.

The parallels to the present Y application are remarkable. Larry Weisman, Pete Romano, and I were all Compo Playground supporters and defend-

ers in court. Like the other three applications, the Y must move to a residential neighborhood, the expansion of its use or footprint on Main Street is now prohibited by the regulations. The Y owns its property at Mahackeno and under the existing regulations has the right to use its property subject to meeting the special permit requirements, which it has done. The other three applications all faced opposition for scale, parking, traffic, and environmental issues, but those issues were all satisfactorily addressed during the approval process — just as they have been or will be for the Y. Just as people now value living near the beach and the synagogues, so too do families all across the country value living near Family Y's.

The other three projects represent a diversity of services vital to the quality of life in Westport. So too does the Y. No other agency offers services to 6,000 families in our area. The loss of these services would be devastating to our community. The proof of the need for the Y's services is that the Y has continued to operate despite more than 12 years of search for a new location and the many inadequacies of the present building.

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So it's move to Mahackeno, or close the doors. I support the current application because Westport needs a family Y. Thank you for your diligence and your time.