

The Quill



Rule of law must prevail

The world is a mean place these days, what with all the wars, rumors of wars, and incendiary confrontations about the economy, culture, and religion.

The issues we debate are momentous, and it is no surprise that the arguments are heated, attacks become personal, and insults often take the place of reason.

But have we reached the point on the local level that insulting our neighbors is replacing rational debate? It would seem so, based on remarks made at recent hearings at the Westport Planning and Zoning Commission on the application by the Westport Weston Family Y to build a new facility at Camp Mahackeno.

To their credit, most speakers on both sides of the issue have presented cogent arguments supporting their point of view. The debate comes down to whether the Family Y has the legal right, based on local and state regulations, to build its new facility on land it has owned for many years, despite the view of neighbors and others in town that the project would threaten their own rights and lead to traffic and environmental changes that would be detrimental for Westport.

Family Y officials say they will meet any proper conditions the zoning commission may set to mitigate any possible adverse impact of the project; the commission must weigh the arguments fairly and adhere to the pertinent local and state regulations. It is a difficult task; the public hearings alone have taken more time than any in Westport history, and the commission's deliberations haven't even begun yet.

But the commission's job is made even more difficult when its members become targets of personal insults directed at them by residents or lawyers.

"The scent of fascism is in the air," one lawyer stated in a letter read into the record at a public hearing last week.

"The scent of fascism"? Please. Not only does such a personal insult reflect very poorly on the person who made it; it does absolutely nothing to advance a rational argument. And, perhaps more than any other town body, the zoning commission must adhere to the complicated local and state zoning regulations that govern any development in town.

Every year around election time, we remind readers that, whatever their opinions about particular local candidates, we need to remember that all the men and women on our local boards and commissions are volunteers, who spend countless hours of their own time listening to arcane presentations on complicated issues that would bore most of us after about five minutes. They certainly deserve far more than to be personally insulted, or to have their motives questioned by people who are under the impression that such attacks will win their side of the argument.

We are a nation of laws, after all. And we are a town where the rule of law must not be supplanted by a pattern of insults against our neighbors.