

P&Z Commission Sets Schedule for Family Y Meetings

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The Planning and Zoning Commission (P&Z) has set its schedule of meetings to consider the Westport Weston Family Y's application for special permit use of its 32-acre Camp Mahackeno property.

P&Z's meetings on the proposed new Y will be held at 7 p.m. in the Westport Town Hall auditorium. Public hearings are scheduled for Thursday, March 13; Tuesday, March 18; Thursday, March 27; Monday, April 21; Thursday, April 24, and, if necessary, Monday, April 28.

The commission will then close its public hearings and meet in work sessions on Monday, May 12; Monday, May 19, and Thursday, May 29, according to Larry Bradley, P&Z director.

"P&Z is in the process of doing its review of the application with the expectation and goal of completing that by March 13," he said.

Bradley said his department has also hired a traffic consultant to review traffic reports conducted by the Y's traffic consultants, Frederick P. Clark Associates of Fairfield.

All sessions will be televised on the town cable access channel 79 and carried via streaming video on the town Web site at www.westportct.gov

Helene Weir, Y's chief executive officer,

said the Y is pleased to be going before P&Z with its application.

"It's been a long process," she said.

The Y's proposal, which entails the construction of a 102,000-square-foot facility south of the Merritt Parkway's Exit 41, was approved by Westport's Flood and Erosion Control Board in October 2006 by a vote of 4 to 1 and the Conservation Commission in late April 2007 by a 6-to-1 tally. The Representative Town Meeting also approved those decisions as they relate to the town's Waterway Protection Line Ordinance in early August by a vote of 18 to 17 after it

was brought before that body for review by petition.

Furthermore, the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) granted in August the necessary permits for the Y to install an underground alternative wastewater treatment plant on the south side of Poplar Plains Brook. Referred to as a FAST (fixed-film activated sludge treatment) system, the apparatus is designed to cleanse 34,000 gallons of effluent a day from the Family Y before it enters Lees Pond.

The DEP's granting of the permit was preceded by months of opposition from

YDowntown!, a local group that advocates keeping the Y downtown. However, the Y's representatives, in December 2006, entered into a "contract for sale" of the building for more than \$20 million to Bedford Square Associates with the agreement that the Y will have to move out of that building within three to five years.

In May 2006, the DEP gave notice that it would issue a tentative permit to the Family Y, whereupon YDowntown! intervened in July 2006 and a notice of a public hearing was published in August 2006. Public hear-

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ings were held in September 2006 in Town Hall and in Hartford, and the DEP issued a final decision in late February recommending a draft permit for the FAST system be granted.

Subsequently, YDowntown! filed its exception to the DEP's final proposed decision in March, and an oral argument, with additional briefing by all parties to the exceptions, was heard on May 3. The state agency rejected the appeal in August.

Throughout the course of these approvals from the local boards and the DEP, the Family Y proposal has also been challenged by neighbors of Camp Mahackeno and other residents in the form of comments at public hearings, letters to the editor, appeals to deci-

sions and lawsuits. Those against the Y's proposal have said, among other things, that the Y's future location on Sunny Lane would harm the ecology of Lees Pond, result in the deforestation of Camp Mahackeno and create excessive traffic within the residential area.

Furthermore, Y member Win Baum, resigned from the board of directors in late March at a board meeting during which members made a motion to vacate his seat after this newspaper published an op-ed he wrote titled, "Imagine the Possibilities: Westport Without a Y."

Following his resignation, he and Thomas Orofino, a fellow Y member, founded the Y Rescue Group and held meetings giving people an opportunity to voice

where they'd like the Y to be located.

On Monday, Baum said residents at the meetings came up with four possible locations for the future Y — Baron's South, Winslow Park, the Imperial Avenue parking lot and Jesup Green. The Town of Westport, however, hasn't offered any of these sites to the Family Y.

When asked if the Y Rescue Group will hold more meetings, Baum said, "We'll see what happens."

Orofino said the Y's contract for sale with Bedford Associates includes "incentive clauses" for the Y to sell the building sooner for as much as an additional \$1 million or more. Orofino said the Y has used its reported sale of the current location to pressure

Westport's land-use boards into approving the proposal.

"They've put it that if you don't approve it, you'll shut down the Y," he said. "It's an unfair tactic by the Y. They need to make this more of an open process and not intimidate these people."

First Selectman Gordon Joseloff has expressed an interest in keeping the Y downtown, and hired engineers to look at Baron's South and Jesup Green as possible locations. He has also said he'd prefer that the Y at Mahackeno, if approved, be connected to the town's sewer system despite Camp Mahackeno being located outside the "blue line," which delineates which properties in town can be connected to the town sewer.

Weir, however, has said the Y has determined that, after considering at about 40 sites in the area, including its present location, Camp Mahackeno is the only viable location to provide the range of services the Y wants to offer its members.

"We're building this Y for another 85 years," she said.

Indy Goldberg, a spokesman for YDowntown! who lives just south of Camp Mahackeno on

Rices Lane, said YDowntown! members are amazed at the outpouring of support in recent weeks for its position against the Mahackeno site.

"The Y at Mahackeno will bring sprawl, overdevelopment and unmanageable traffic that will be felt far beyond the northwest corner of town and affect all Westporters," she said. "There are still opportunities for the YMCA to pursue a downtown site if they would be willing to compromise. Obviously, a rejection by P&Z will force them to look elsewhere, consider sites that they once rejected and compromise on some of the aspects of this application."

She also said there has been too much focus on "the personal aspects of this fight" and not enough focus on the application.

"When you get right down to it, the application submitted by the YMCA does not meet the special permit requirements and regulations, nor does it comply with the new town plan," she said. "I urge the public to come out to the P&Z hearings and listen to what is being proposed and then stand up and tell P&Z whether or not they believe a YMCA at Mahackeno is good for Westport."