

8 Trustee Candidates Face Off on Starwood and Police Station

By Jananne Abel, Editor

March 4, 2016



The proposed Starwood project for the former United Hospital site on Boston Post Road remains a contentious topic for the village trustee candidates.

The eight candidates running for six seats on the Port Chester Board of Trustees in the Mar. 15 election met in the Westmore News offices on the weekend of Feb. 22 and 23 in two groups of four to debate some of the major issues they will be dealing with during the next three years if they are elected or re-elected. Among them are Starwood Capital's proposal to redevelop the **United Hospital** site and their plan to rehabilitate or replace the current police station and courthouse.

Four candidates -- Greg Adams, Dan Brakewood, Gene Ceccarelli and Luis Marino -- are incumbents, one -- Bart Didden -- is a former trustee, one -- Frank Ferrara -- ran unsuccessfully three years ago and two -- Alex Chavarria and Alex Payan -- are political newcomers.

Trustee Joe Kenner is not seeking reelection after being elected twice following an appointment while Trustee Sam Terenzi died unexpectedly Jan. 5.

As in the past two elections in 2010 and 2013, trustees will be elected using the cumulative voting system whereby voters have six votes they can disperse however they see fit, from giving one vote to six different candidates to giving all six votes to one candidate.

Voters will also be able to take advantage of early voting starting on Mar. 7.

Voting Days and Hours

Early voting:








Mon., Mar. 7 to Fri., Mar. 11 from 9 a.m.-8 p.m.
Sat., Mar. 12 from 9 a.m.-5 p.m.

Election Day:

Tues., Mar. 15 from 7 a.m.-9 p.m.

Trustee candidates pinned down on village issues

Following interviews of all 8 Port Chester trustee candidates at the Westmore News offices on Saturday, Feb. 20 and Sunday, Feb. 21, all candidates were asked to answer “yes” or “no” to the following questions. Candidates were told if they left an answer blank, their response would be listed as “refused to answer.”

	 Gregory Adams Democratic Greater Port Chester	 Daniel Brakewood Democratic Greater Port Chester	 Gene Ceccarelli Republican Conservative Independence Port Chester First	 Alex Chavarria Port Chester Pride	 Bart Didden Republican Conservative Independence	 Frank Ferrara Republican Conservative Independence Port Chester First	 Luis Marino Democratic Greater Port Chester	 Alex Payan Port Chester Forward
Do you support acquiring property at Irving Avenue and Poningo Street for a new police station/courthouse?	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES
Do you support renovating the existing police station/courthouse?	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES
Do you support building a new police station/courthouse next door to the existing one?	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES
Do you support extending the permit amnesty program again after it expires in September 2016?	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Do you support giving Starwood Capital a tax break (PILOT) to develop the former United Hospital property?	NO	YES	Refused to Answer	YES	NO	Refused to Answer	NO	NO
Do you support requiring Starwood to participate in a community benefits agreement where they would, for example, promise to provide workforce housing and hire local workers?	YES	YES	Refused to Answer	YES	YES	Refused to Answer	YES	YES
Do you support requiring future residential developers to set aside a portion of their project for affordable housing?	YES	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES
Do you support requiring future residential developers to pay a fee to cover the costs of children entering an already-overcrowded school district?	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES
Do you support working with G&S to make the marina parking lot paid rather than free?	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES
Do you support the proposed G&S 79-unit residential/retail project at the intersection of Westchester Avenue and North Main Street which is currently an empty lot?	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES
Do you support creating a local law banning developers with proposals or existing projects in the village from donating to Port Chester political campaigns?	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES
After this election and cumulative voting in no longer federally mandated, do you support returning to the former election system in Port Chester where two trustees are up each year with one vote per seat?	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES
Do you support requesting an extension to continue using cumulative voting in Port Chester?	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO
Do you support an alternate method of voting in Port Chester besides the current cumulative voting or the previous at-large voting system?	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES
Did you vote in the last village election?	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Following interviews of all eight Port Chester trustee candidates at the Westmore News offices on Saturday, February 20 and Sunday, February 21, all candidates were asked to answer “yes” or “no” to 15 questions.

Starwood plan for hospital site

All candidates are generally in favor of the mixed use development that is proposed for the former **United Hospital** site. In its third iteration, the current plan, unveiled in April 2014, calls for 730 units of market rate housing, 230 of which are for senior citizens 55+ and 500 targeted toward millennials, 217,000 square feet of medical office/wellness space, 90,000 square feet of restaurant and retail space, and a 135-room limited service hotel, all served by 1,345 parking spaces in garages scattered throughout the 15.4-acre site plus 35 on-street spaces.

This scheme came about after a subcommittee composed of Mayor Neil Pagano and Trustees Gene Ceccarelli and Dan Brakewood worked with Starwood and the Port Chester-based design and planning firm Street-Works in 2013 to come up with a proposal that was generally consistent with the village's master plan.

"I like the project, it's mixed use, not 100% in keeping with the master plan," said Frank Ferrara (Republican, Conservative, Independence, Port Chester First). "It is a living plan, not the gospel. The DEIS (Draft Environmental Impact Statement) says in terms of infrastructure it would have less impact than a running **hospital** had."

Density too great

Most think the density is too great.

"At present they are asking for too much housing over there," said incumbent Trustee Greg Adams (Democrat, Greater Port Chester), who lives near the site in the apartment building at 350 South Regent St. "I want to see the housing component reduced."

"We got a good plan, a mixed use development, a mix of restaurants and retail, a good mix," said incumbent Gene Ceccarelli (Republican, Conservative, Independence, Port Chester First). "We are still not settled on the number of apartments. They still seem to be too high."

"The current proposal is not what falls in line with our master plan," said Alex Chavarria (Port Chester Pride). "They are asking for twice the amount of space."

"My biggest concerns are the density," said incumbent Dan Brakewood (Democrat, Greater Port Chester). "I am going to err on the side of supporting our master plan. They want to more than double the density of the current master plan. We have work to do in negotiating."

"This traffic thing is a big deal," said Ferrara. "If we can't satisfy all concerns, it will have to be in some way scaled back."

"So much of what's been going with the Starwood project has been happening in executive session," said former Trustee Bart Didden (Republican, Conservative, Independence). "The transparency isn't there, so candidates like me are at a disadvantage."

Incumbent Trustee Luis Marino (Democrat, Greater Port Chester) begged to differ.

"I hear Bart say we had a special meeting," said Marino. "That's not true. We had a committee from the board working with them [Starwood]. It was a committee that came back to us and said this is what is going on. I don't think we are making any kind of different deals under the table. I see a clear, transparent board."

Traffic and other impacts

The village and Starwood are presently going through the state-required environmental review process for the project which lays out its impacts and how they will be mitigated.

The major impacts trustee candidates raised as disturbing them are its effect on the Port Chester school district and traffic as well as making sure Starwood pays its fair share in taxes.

"We got a report on traffic about three weeks ago," said Chavarria. "It's not very good."

"In terms of the traffic impact analysis which is just coming out now, that is something I am very concerned about, also the reasonability of it once we have the holiday season, for example," said Alex Payan (Port Chester Forward). "Sometimes it takes me 45 minutes just to exit Port Chester."

"How in the world can they widen South Regent Street?" asked Adams. "I live on South Regent Street."

"They are talking about coming out of High Street and you can't make a left turn," he added. "Rye may not be in favor of that."

In fact, many Rye residents and officials talked about that very thing at public hearings on the DEIS . There is some concern that Rye may even sue to stop the project.

“The City of Rye could tie this up in litigation,” said Brakewood. “Ninety percent of those who came to speak were from the City of Rye. They have already retained legal counsel. We need to work with the state DOT to get this thing done.”

“That’s the developer’s problem,” responded Ferrara.

“They are trying to work with Rye,” said Ceccarelli. “They have three traffic studies. They are working with the City of Rye, our traffic engineers and their own. Rye Brook also has some concerns.”

“There is still a lot of work to be done, a lot of environmental impact reviews to be completed,” said Ceccarelli. “We have the benefit of excellent support staff. We have hired excellent firms to help us through the process.”

However, he added, “We have to make sure the schools are not impacted” and “I don’t want to see a nightmare on the Post Road. I would like to see a pedestrian footbridge on the Post Road. I’m not satisfied with what they have [in their proposal] now. It wasn’t designed properly to stick a crosswalk across the Post Road. It’s ridiculous.”

The project cannot have a negative impact by adding more children to the Port Chester school system, said Payan. “In our elementary schools, middle school and high school you have 25 or 30 students per classroom. When I was growing up we had about a 15-student cap. As a teacher, the ratio determines how much you can learn. And of course the taxpayers shouldn’t be held responsible for additional overcrowding.”

Since “the Starwood project is literally my front door,” said Adams, a retired social worker, he also has special interest in the construction process. “When they do the demolition, I want to have some say-so,” he said, “and those along Touraine [Avenue] will be seriously impacted. If there is asbestos, I want to make sure we are protected.”

“The environmental piece is the major piece,” said Ceccarelli. “I will not vote for anything if it does impact us. I don’t want to see Port Chester holding the bag of any environmental mishaps. If anything does go wrong down the road, bring the developer back to the board, do a lookback, you pay now for these impacts.” He referred to including a lookback clause or agreement as part of the final approval for the project.

Taxes

Because of the demolition of the old **hospital** buildings and construction of infrastructure required for the mixed use project, Starwood is asking for a Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) which would be substantially less than a commercial taxpayer would otherwise pay.

“In terms of a PILOT, I want to make sure Starwood pays their fair share,” said Adams.

“I would never say give the store away to a developer,” said Ceccarelli. “At the same time the developer has to be successful. We have to strike a balance. That balance hasn’t been reached yet.”

“For them to have a free pass and not pay any taxes is inconceivable,” said Payan.

“We really have to make it a plan that works for Starwood and our citizens, not just for Starwood,” said Chavarria, who is Director of Community and Family Services at Carver Center. “We’ve got to make sure they can pay their fair share and it doesn’t become a burden for our citizens.”

“I agree they need to be paying their fair share in taxes,” said Brakewood. “I would be willing to negotiate with them. We want to incentivize the commercial aspects. That’s where I think we should be offering them a PILOT. They should pay their fair share on the residential units.”

“The tax structure has to complement the community and answer its needs,” said Didden.

“Starwood asked for a PILOT on the entire project, and that’s traditionally not what happens with a project this size,” said Ferrara, who is chairman of the Port Chester Industrial Development Agency (IDA). “That is not what happened with G&S. It is going to be up to Starwood. I would assume they would treat this as multiple projects.”

The IDA rather than the village board makes the determination about one or more PILOTs on a project.

“Once a project is approved by the board, the investor will file an application for assistance to the IDA,” explained Ferrara. “That application contains a wealth of information that allows us to do our due diligence. We would work up what we feel is an assessment, look at the income revenue of the project. We do this for every project. We would work up a cost benefit analysis and then have a public hearing that is discussed and vetted.” All of this would happen after the project’s Final Environmental Impact Statement, which is currently in the works, is approved by the village board.

Ferrara, a self-employed financial manager, intends to remain on the IDA if he is elected. However, it will ultimately be up to the village board.

“If they want a PILOT, we have to work with them to create a Community Benefits Agreement and something that works for us and for everyone,” concluded Chavarria.

Community Benefits Agreement

The Sustainable Port Chester Alliance, a grassroots coalition of faith, housing, education, labor and Port Chester resident groups, has been pushing a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) between the village and Starwood.

Payan is in agreement with Sustainable Port Chester, which he said formed to represent community stakeholders. “We have to demand to Starwood what we want,” he said. “Ask them to hire from within. I would also like to see them fully fund a youth community center.” Payan works with youth as director of Port Chester Cares.

“The bottom line for me if Starwood wants to add more residential density, make sure there are no impacts and they pay their fair share,” said Chavarria. “A Community Benefits Agreement combined with a PILOT can be a win-win for everyone.”

“I think their position has merits,” said Didden. “I agree with the signage they put up Tax Starwood, Not Port Chester.”

“I think they are a great group of people and I wish we had more people like them,” said Brakewood. “They are concerned about how it’s going to be built and how much they are going to pay.”

“This big project is going to affect the village,” said Marino, a custodian in the Scarsdale School District. “The community should have something to say.”

“The village does have a mechanism for some of it to happen, but it is not as expansive as a CBA,” said Brakewood. If Starwood wants a certain level of density, they would have to pay a bonus which would be reinvested into the community in four different funds. As for a CBA, “It is going to be a negotiation that the village is going to have to work hard to make sure it happens.”

“What I’ve been hearing, we all agree,” concluded Marino. “Whoever gets elected, let’s do the right thing. They should pay their fair share of taxes and use our own people, give job opportunity to our residents from Port Chester. Carpenters do deserve to get a job. We’ve got to discuss it. I’m not against that.”

Getting it done

Ceccarelli and Ferrara, running first and foremost on the Port Chester First ticket, have stated in their campaign literature that “United **Hospital** has been stalled,” which other incumbents rebutted and even Ceccarelli admitted was not the case.

"They are getting done," said Ceccarelli when Chavarria claimed nothing had been done on the project in two years. "They are moving methodically."

"This board is screwing up, I've been hearing," said Marino. "When we received the project until now, we didn't stop anything. We never said you're not going to build."

Brakewood called it "a little campaign hyperbole."

"We can't allow a moribund property to generate \$650,000 in taxes when the right project can generate millions and lower the tax burden throughout the village," said Ferrara. "This is the kind of thing we need." He added that "these kinds of projects only get built in certain times of the economic cycle. If we miss this cycle, we could wait another 5-8 years until money is willing to be invested again. We need to find a way to proceed."

"We can't let that property sit there another 10 years," agreed Didden. "There is a win-win out there to be had. We just have to find it and with the transparency the residents deserve."

"As a member of the board who was elected shortly after Starwood bought the property and a member of the IDA, I am very well situated in order to finalize the agreement and make sure they pay their fair share in taxes and have the continuity we need in order to complete the project," said Brakewood, vice president of customer insights at Gartner Research in Stamford, Ct. "We can't really afford to start over again."

He concluded that "if we manage this process, we are probably on track to putting a shovel in the ground in the next three years."

"My skills as a mediator will go far in trying to come up with a final solution that benefits the community," said Didden. Besides being president of USA Central Station Alarm Corp., which is based in Port Chester, he is also an executive claims manager for an insurance company and settles claims around the country.

"Port Chester is going to be in trouble if we don't expand our assessables," said Ferrara. "That is the key issue of our campaign. There are a lot of nice-to-haves. I would like to focus on what we have to have."

In the meantime, Payan worries about teenagers going onto the vacant **hospital** property and daring each other to sleep there overnight because Starwood's security is lax.

"If I get re-elected, I am going to push to make sure both buildings come down as soon as possible," said Brakewood, referring to the **hospital** buildings and 999 High St., which served as a residence for **hospital** workers, now that it is clear that the latter will come down.

Police station and courthouse

The police station and courthouse, which dates back almost 80 years, is outmoded, too small and, despite the hundreds of thousands of dollars that have been poured into it over the years, no longer meets the needs of those who work there. The idea of building a new police station and courthouse goes back at least six years, but to date the village board has not settled on a plan to remedy the situation.

"I brought it up to the public my first term that we need a new police station," said Trustee Luis Marino (Democrat, Greater Port Chester), who is seeking his third three-year term. He said others on the board at the time laughed at him.

"Our people deserve a better atmosphere than where they are working," said Marino. Not one candidate disagreed with him.

"It is completely unacceptable to have employees work for so many years in the deplorable conditions of that building," said Bart Didden (Republican, Conservative, Independence), who served one term on the board and then lost his re-election bid in 2013.

"The conditions of the police station were terrible," said Marino. "It got better. We invested a lot of money." However, "they still don't even have showers."



"I'm very passionate about this issue," said Trustee Gene Ceccarelli (Republican, Conservative, Independence, Port Chester First), a retired Port Authority Police Department assistant chief who is running for a second term on the board.

In the past the building at 350 North Main St. was cited with multiple safety and health violations, some of which were corrected, said Ceccarelli, as well as drainage and roofing problems. There are still issues with the layout of the building and with detaining juveniles and the side of the structure is buckling.

"The courts are a neglected group," he added, despite how busy they are and how much revenue they generate, \$2.8 million in 2015. With fines and forfeitures, the police also bring in a lot of revenue.

Ceccarelli is impressed with the National Development Council which was brought on board in 2012 as a potential developer. "I think they were the best thing that could come along to spark a new police station and courthouse," he said. "They would rent it to the village and then we would buy it back in 20 to 30 years for \$1."

Since 2009, two studies have been done which have considered renovating the current building versus building a new one and various locations. A subcommittee of Ceccarelli, Marino and Trustee Dan Brakewood (Democrat, Greater Port Chester), all seeking re-election, was appointed last year to do the final vetting.

Ceccarelli has been on a mission visiting various police stations in the region. He did some research and came up with McClaren, Wilson & Lawrie Inc., which has built more than 200 public safety facilities across the country, and convinced the rest of the board to approve hiring them to prepare a report vetting the two prior studies. That report is currently in the works.

"It should be coming back soon to say whether we are on track with the two prior studies that we need a new police station," Ceccarelli said. After it does, "our board better start moving forward."

Agreement and disagreement

The other seven candidates were pretty much in agreement about picking up the pace. They did disagree about whether a new facility should be built or the present one gutted and renovated. And there were various ideas about location.

"I think we have to consider the least cost option," said first time candidate Alex Chavarria (Port Chester Pride). "We have to balance something that meets the needs of our court with something that is affordable for taxpayers."

"Maybe we wasted a lot of time in studying that \$40 million project Port Chester taxpayers cannot afford," he added, referring to the municipal center that was considered at Irving Avenue and Poningo Street which became the focal point of the 2015 mayoral campaign in which Ceccarelli ran unsuccessfully against current Mayor Dennis Pilla. "Research information and establish some deadlines. Take the least cost approach, decide and get it done."

"We all agreed it is more costly to rehab that existing building," said Ceccarelli, referring to the current village board.

"Rebuilding in place was \$29 million," said Frank Ferrara, Ceccarelli's running mate (Republican, Conservative, Independence, Port Chester First), who ran for the first time three years ago.

"Alex speaks of deadlines and that is the crux of my campaign, deadlines and projections, focusing on what you want to accomplish and putting out deadlines that are achievable," Ferrara added. "It makes

sure you get things done.” He said the police station/courthouse needs to be in the purview of the next three-year term.

Ferrara doesn’t know if it is cost effective to rehab 350 North Main because it would require moving the police and court out during the renovation.

Ceccarelli opposes rehabilitation for that reason. “It is very disruptive,” he said.

As far as acquiring the Steilmann property next door, which has been considered, Ferrara is against taking the property of a “going, vital concern” unless they are a willing seller. “Port Chester doesn’t have enough of them,” he said.

If Steilmann is willing to sell and move somewhere else in the village, perhaps the Industrial Development Agency, of which Ferrara is chairman, could help.

“I’m not married to Irving and Poningo,” said Ceccarelli. “I would be open to looking at other locations,” particularly somewhere that would spark some economic development in the village such as what he called “the northern stretch” where River House Bar & Grill recently went out of business and there are several auto-related businesses.

“Economic development is part and parcel to this process,” Ceccarelli said.

“Why has it taken so long?” asked first time candidate Alex Payan (Port Chester Forward). “It was like the blind leading the blind.”

Brakewood said investigating a municipal center was “a huge distraction,” which he opposed from day one because he didn’t think the village could afford it. That ended up wasting three or four years and took a mayoral election to defeat. “Now we are marching more together,” he said.

Brakewood, who has been on the village board since 2006, gave a presentation to the board last summer about some of the options he thought the village could implement at the current police station which would meet the needs of the police department and the taxpayers could afford. He suggested leveling the current building and adding more space off the back. That presentation, he said, led to the subcommittee.

Ceccarelli visited other police stations like E. Rutherford, N.J., said Brakewood, “because we realized we don’t have the facts and information.” The studies are very inconsistent as far as how much space is needed.

Brakewood thinks “we can move the high volume traffic court to the gym next to the Horton School,” which was the original plan when the village purchased the former school for its village hall. The gym was to be converted to a courtroom/meeting room for \$1 million, which today he said might cost \$1.5 million.

“We could split the court facility where you have noncriminal court at Horton School and smaller, limited facilities at North Main Street,” he said.

As far as the police station, “if we build off the back, we can give about 30,000 square feet, almost double what they currently have,” said Brakewood.

To solve the problem of relocation, he said, “if we build an addition off the back, people continue in front and then move. Logistically it is more complicated but a lot cheaper than acquiring land and building from scratch.”

“I am for renovating the existing police station,” said Greg Adams (Democrat, Greater Port Chester), who is seeking a second term. “It is a tremendous savings to the taxpayers.” He supports Brakewood’s idea of expanding and redesigning the building in the back of the current structure. He would be for acquiring Steilmann for parking if it is needed.

Brakewood likes the current site because it is highly visible.

Didden is not in favor of building the facility on Main Street because “it is the main artery into our downtown” and he thinks “we could have highly taxed structures on our main street that are economically viable and give more assessables.”

"We have to think long-term and we have to do it right," said Didden. "We have to find a place where it can exist where the square footage tax dollar is less than it is on Main Street. I would like to see that whole Main Street corridor go all commercial and maybe be able to widen that street a bit."

Didden thinks "there are developers that would buy the [350 North] Main Street site for another Castle or Mariner."

Opposing Main Street, Didden said "I have some positive thoughts about Poningo and Irving because I would like to see a public safety center" in conjunction with fire headquarters.

"It's really about keeping it simple," said Payan. "What are your needs and what are your wants? How do you envision this workplace?"

"I am in favor of a new police station or keeping what we have now and gutting it," he said. "We need to be strategic and it has to be done well for it to last for 50 or 100 years." He compared this project to the soccer field at Columbus Park which does not allow for play in the winter so the Port Chester Soccer Club is going to Tarrytown and Stamford "just to find a place to play soccer."

"If we waited for a dome, we would never have had a soccer field," responded Brakewood.

Marino chimed in that lights for that field are in the village's current capital budget and coming soon.

Marino, a volunteer firefighter, is 100% in favor of a new police station, but "where we build it doesn't really matter." The costs should be looked at carefully, but the board should take a lesson from the newest firehouse the village built on Grace Church Street which, he said, "is nothing but a disaster."

Since all the candidates are not on the same page, "it does at the end of the day come down to negotiation and compromise," concluded Brakewood.

Related issues

Two candidates took the opportunity to raise their own related issues.

This issue brings to light "the lack of thought and care the village government provides for the maintenance of our municipal structures," said Didden, "whether firehouses or 222 Grace Church St." where the paint on the window sills in the mayor's office and the clerk's office is chipping and cracked.

"This entire issue brings up the fact that we are a challenged community in terms of badly needed revenue generation," said Ferrara. "It's the reason why we need to expand the base of assessables as our #1 priority." That, coupled with focusing on bringing city status to Port Chester, could allow the village to be able to invest in capital projects such as this one.

Ceccarelli's bottom line is that "the people that protect us deserve a building that is suitable for the functions they perform."