



In the Village, the Peaceful Village...

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By **Bill Hohlfeld**

The Sustainable Port Chester Alliance continues to be clear regarding their expectations of Starwood Capital. If the \$45 billion behemoth would like to come to Port Chester to expand their already massive portfolio of real estate holdings, they are going to have to share the wealth with those who make it possible for them to profit. A Community Benefits Agreement is a likely way to achieve that goal, and quickly became the theme of the Town Hall meeting held at the Port Chester Knights of Columbus building on Thursday, October 1.

The Alliance seeking this agreement consists of a variety of stakeholders, including local church parishioners, residents of both Port Chester and Rye, labor organizations and the regional chapter of the NAACP. Those members are standing together to ensure that Starwood's proposed United Hospital project provides much needed affordable housing, adequate school funding, all required environmental safeguards and a source of good jobs for local workers. If, at first glance, the scenario has something of a "David and Goliath" aura about it, a closer look reveals some mighty heavy stones in Port Chester's sling.

For starters, one of Port Chester's chief allies in this struggle, and panelists at Thursday's meeting was the city of Rye's mayor, Joe Sack. With his city lying just to the south of Port Chester and sharing a border, whatever impacts the one, spills over into the life of the other. He has faithfully attended both Town Hall and Port Chester Village Trustee meetings, and lent a certain gravitas to the proceedings. He does so, not only by comfortably navigating the waters of government, but of openly stating his resolve to stay in the fight until any problems associated with the development (for him, a prime concern is traffic patterns) are properly mitigated. As evidence of that resolve, he cites his most recent court battle with the County of Westchester over expansion of Playland. It's a battle which he won, and although he says he'd rather come to an amicable agreement, he's not afraid to use the courts again to protect the best interests of his city.

Another valuable resource on the panel was Ms. Virginia Ellis, who is President of the Port Chester Teachers Association, and as many of her colleagues are, a resident of the community. A math teacher by profession, she relied upon the old axiom of "numbers don't lie." Her carefully researched and compiled figures showed a sharp contrast between the uber-rich developer and the overburdened school system of which she is a part. Starwood has some 247 luxury locations in over 14 countries worldwide, and besides their current fortune, have done over \$65 billion in real estate transactions in the last two decades.

That leaves them in a very different financial situation than the Port Chester school system, where an estimated 66% of its students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 25% are not proficient in the English language and 12% are challenged by learning disabilities. This is a school system still

struggling to recover from the recession of 2008 and a \$16.3 million gap in state aid that came along with it. "Why," she wonders from her already overcrowded classroom "should Starwood be let off the hook for \$34 million; why should the privileged ask for more and get out of paying their fair share?"

Also questioning the fairness of the project as currently proposed by Starwood, was Pastor Bruce Baker of All Souls Parish. He alluded specifically to Starwood's intention to do away with the multi-family housing unit at 999 High Street. This complex, when used to capacity, contains 134 affordable housing units. At present, only 42 of these units are in use, and Starwood would demolish even these. Not given to hyperbole, the Reverend Baker simply stated "This is not a good idea." He informed the audience of the common practice of their neighboring communities in the county. Recently, Hobbs Ferry agreed to a 220 unit development and received a 20 unit set aside of units for affordable housing. Hastings-on-Hudson struck a similar bargain with a developer, and got a set aside of 12 apartments out of 66.

The same type of negotiations took place in Croton-on-Hudson. Anywhere from 10 to 20 percent of those developments became available for low to moderate income families. "If Starwood were to follow that formula," stated Pastor Baker "it would be replacing the number of units that Port Chester would be losing." It was a point well made.

Also adding clout to the panel was guest speaker and Fordham Law Professor, Brian Glick, who was well versed in the subject of Community Benefits Agreements and came to offer some sound advice. He views them as an effective tool to ensure against a list of broken promises. They are a common practice now and in no way unprecedented. He advised to get specific dates and numbers written into the agreement to avoid vague terms such as "best effort" as they often leave the developer with too large a loop hole through which to slip.

He went on to say that the list of concessions made to a community could come in the form of parks, community health care centers, schools, environmental clean-ups and more. "Starwood," he predicted "already has an A, B, and C plan, and is willing to do what it has to do."

He recommended getting cash amounts for certain projects being put aside in advance and making sure that whoever signed the agreement on the part of the community be an agency that is still in existence at the time consideration is due. Finally, Professor Glick pointed to the CBA reached at the Kingsbridge Armory in the Bronx as a model for what can be attained. It included 890 local hire construction jobs, 260 living wage permanent jobs support for local small businesses and even free ice time at the skating rink for neighborhood children. The Professor ended by wishing the community good luck.

Moderator, Joan Grangenois-Thomas summed up the position of the Alliance and the greater community. "The resource known as the United Hospital Project is nothing less than a gem. We will protect it, and never give it away."