

## Port Chester Residents Speak - Will Village Trustees Listen?

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By Bill Hohlfeld

The village of Port Chester crackled with energy last night, and most of it was being generated at the local Knights of Columbus, where there was a Town Hall meeting featuring the Sustainable Port Chester Alliance. They were there to raise concerns over Starwood Capital's proposed United Hospital project, and further galvanize the citizens.

A diverse panel of speakers, moderated by Joan Grangenio-Thomas, President of the Rye/PortChester NAACP, explained the concerns of the Alliance, and urged local residents to join them in making their voices heard to the Mayor and other Village Trustees.

It was clear from the onset that this was not to be a typical NIMBY styled action to stall development. It was, instead, a genuine effort as Ms. Grangenio-Thomas stated "not to put the kibosh on the project, but to see to it that community needs are met." That community is indeed well represented by the Alliance which is comprised of local residents, church members, educators and, of course, the building trades.



One can easily argue that the Port Chester community needs a strong advocate in this discussion, as the developer, Connecticut based Starwood Capital, has a list of requests that would benefit them financially while having a negative economic and social impact on the village residents that would reach far into the future. High on the wish list is rezoning that will allow for greater density (aka higher profits for Starwood) while not properly providing for the increase in public services that would automatically accompany such an increase in population.



Another component of the Starwood plan is the destruction of 999 High Street, a Mitchell- Lama housing complex. That would result in the loss of 133 affordable housing units, while making no provision to replace them. It should be noted that this comes at a time when there is already a notable shortage of affordable housing in the area. Panel member, Bianca Lopez, who is also Director of the Neighborhood Preservation Company quoted hard figures for rents that average \$1,695/mo. for a one bedroom apartment, and well over \$2,000./mo. for a two bedroom.

She questioned why there was no provision for a 20% set aside for low income residents who, she reminded us, are very often the elderly or young people with entry level positions.



Last but not least, is Starwood's push to enter into a payment in lieu of taxes ("PILOT") program. It is estimated that over the 20 year life of the program, this could cost local taxpayers close to \$59 million in tax revenue. The largest portion of that number is an estimated loss of \$34 million to the school district as pointed out by panel member Rob Reis, who as a parent of two children in the Port Chester School District, has some very real concerns about Starwood's math. According to Starwood, the 730 additional units that rezoning would allow them to build would mean the addition of only 17 new students. Mr. Reis

vehemently disagrees, and estimates that the number would be much closer to 100. Mr. Reis holds a unique perspective in that not only is he a parent and taxpayer, he is also a school teacher in White Plains and as such, has experienced first-hand the effects of development on an already burdened school system.

Mr. Reis is not alone in his skepticism regarding Starwood's calculations. Tom Kennedy of Kennedy, Jennik & Murray, the law firm which represents the Alliance, gave the audience a close look at some of Starwood's other faulty math. For instance, when Starwood speaks of the "good paying" construction jobs they will create, they cite 1,075 jobs generating \$116 million in wages. While that seems impressive on the surface, a bit of further scrutiny reveals an average wage of \$31.92 per hour. Bear in mind that those figures include the salaries of all management personnel such as project managers, superintendents, etc. One wonders just how many "good jobs" will be provided when the average prevailing wage cost for a building trades worker in Westchester County is over \$73.00 per hour, if one includes benefits such as health care and pension payments. This disparity is especially troubling in the case of a developer such as Starwood, who has repeatedly been involved with irresponsible contractors who have been found guilty of municipal, state and federal crimes such as wage theft and extortion, as well as myriad health and safety violations that are a threat not only to workers but to the public.



Even more absurd are the projections for salaries of the permanent jobs that will be created as a result of the project. Mr. Kennedy pointed to Starwood's claim that the 944 long term jobs that supposedly would be created would reap \$157 million in the form of paychecks. If that were true, it would mean average salaries of \$166,000 per year. Considering the fact that 225 of these jobs are in retail and food service, the remaining 719 jobs must come with truly astronomical yearly incomes. The facts in Mr. Kennedy's presentation spoke for themselves.

It was not only the the voices of those at the dais that were heard last night. The residents of the village were also quick to speak their minds. Port Chester resident and urban development professional John Reavis voiced his opinion that Starwood follow guidelines set down long ago by the NAACP regarding the provision of affordable housing and support of public education. Bob Johnson, President of the Board of Education recounted how after he questioned how Starwood arrived at their figures of rents being based on annual incomes of \$91,000/yr. when in Port Chester the average family income is \$51,000/yr., the school board has become persona non grata at IDA meetings.

Finally, in a fitting end to the meeting, village resident, Bea Cornetta who has participated in village politics for the past thirty years put the question simply "Why should Starwood profit, but not the village?" Let's hope a lot more people turn up next Tuesday, at the Village Courthouse and demand answers to that question from their mayor and trustees.