

## The Political Process in Port Chester



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By Bill Hohlfeld

Despite the unseasonal heat and humidity, cool heads prevailed last night at the Port Chester Court House on Main Street. The tone of propriety was set when Mayor Pilla of Port Chester convened the public hearing, and all rose to give the Pledge of Allegiance. The Mayor explained there would be no public debate at that time, but rather presentations of the positions of the various stakeholders regarding the draft environmental impact study (DEIS).



The first to speak were the polished legal and development team of consultants representing Starwood Capital. The team is a luxury that the Greenwich based global private equity firm, with tens of billions of dollars at its disposal, can well afford. There were a series of speakers who served up an optimistic view of a tightly contained 36 month work schedule that would result in thousands of good paying jobs, the clean safe removal of 40,000 cubic yards of waste (some of which is hazardous), a smoother, safer flow of traffic, and minimal impact on neighborhood schools. The slide show, replete with statistics, bullet points and aerial shots, ended with artists' renderings of other Starwood projects around the country which, according to the presenters, are nothing short of Shangri-La.

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There were, of course opposing views. The first of many came from the Honorable Joseph Sack, Mayor of the neighboring City of Rye. His city lies adjacent to the proposed United Hospital project, and in his view the scope of development is massive and would have a suffocating effect on the residents of Rye. In his opinion, not nearly enough has been done to properly mitigate the effects of traffic congestion and noise. He went on to say that everyone's best interest could not be served until the NYS DOT presented their independent findings. He then called for an additional public hearing, and an extension, until the end of October, for the submission of written statements.



*Rye Mayor, John Sack*

The next public official to speak was Mr. Robert Johnson, President of the local Board of Education and 25 year resident of Port Chester. He questioned the efficacy of traffic mitigation as outlined by Starwood, raised concerns about pedestrian safety and asked questions about the need for more school crossing guards. His largest concern, however was financial. He expressed serious doubts about the cost of \$13,723.00 per pupil arrived at by Starwood for their purposes and categorized it as "unrealistic." The real number, he maintains is more like \$15,101.00, unless of course the pupil requires special education. That elevates the cost to something more in the vicinity of \$47,000.00.

According to Mr. Johnson, the PILOT length is too long. A five year program, with mitigation costs being recalculated each year should suffice. Taxes, on an already filled to capacity school system should be based on property value, not on some theoretical impact to that system. Anything less could put schools, and their mission at risk.

The private sector was vocal as well, and their round of comments began with Mr. John Tritt, of the Hotel Trades Council. As such, he has a vested interest in the operation of the proposed 135 key hotel. He is also part of **Build Up New York** which is an alliance over 200,000 hotel, building construction and building service workers throughout the metropolitan area. Mr. Tritt questioned the wisdom of granting a tax break of \$60 million to a developer who, at Pier 1 in Brooklyn used B&B Park as their contractor. This resulted in the project being shut down on 11 different occasions by city inspectors, the project exceeding the height restrictions to which it had originally agreed to adhere, and a score of safety complaints from workers on the site. Based on this past record, he did not think it wise to accept Starwood's proposal as is.



*Port Chester resident and carpenter*

Another good example of a stakeholder who is uncertain of his needs being met is Robert Monty, literally a lifelong resident of Port Chester, as he was born in United Hospital. Mr. Monty is a carpenter and would like nothing more than to practice his trade in his own home town. Yet, if responsible contractors are not hired by Starwood there is little chance of that happening. Starwood's past history of using irresponsible contractors as a cost saving method is of prime concern to him. Those kinds of contractors are notorious for wage theft. They also tend to care little for safety or training, and in an industry responsible for 23% of job site fatalities, that is a legitimate concern. Robert Monty would like to be part of the project, but wants some assurances that it will be

completed safely, and that he and his fellow tradesmen are given the opportunity to produce the quality work for which, in his words, "they have a real passion."

It is not just the construction of the project that affects the hard working residents of Port Chester. In the eyes of Joaquin Vallejo, a 39 year resident of Port Chester, the ongoing maintenance of the property should also be a sustainable source of income. Mr. Vallejo is a maintenance supervisor at Westchester Country Club in nearby Harrison, where he has been employed for nearly twenty years. He knows the value of such work. It has given him the opportunity to raise his family in Port Chester where four of his children attended school and are now succeeded by three of his grandchildren. He is convinced that Starwood should pay its fair share of taxes the way he did and that school children should not suffer.



*Lenore Friedlander seeking solutions*

Lenore Friedlander, Executive Director of **Build Up New York** summed up her organization's position with a plea to reason. She is confident that a fair solution is within reach. She cited her own involvement in other efforts to reach a community benefits agreement with private equity firms. Such agreements have provisions for apprenticeship training for workers and a priority for local residents when hiring. They also include improvements to infrastructure and the inclusion of truly affordable housing for those who need it.

Ms. Friedlander noted that Starwood Capital has a history of developing, then selling off their properties in less than ten years. She suggests there be verbiage added to the agreement that make any conditions that applied to Starwood transferable to any future purchaser. With the current wealth and future profits of the private equity firm soaring into billions of dollars, Ms. Friedlander further contends there is no reason that Starwood cannot provide the Village of Port Chester with what is in Starwood's own words, a "truly transformative project."

The list of speakers went on to include additional residents of both Rye and Port Chester, Local 1103 Communications Workers, advocates of parks and recreation, urban development consultants, attorneys, and the NAACP. One local mother of children in the school district had to make the choice to skip her son's "back to school night" to attend the meeting because she felt the far reaching effects of this plan were so much in need of further consideration. This was a diversity that was organic, not manufactured.

One of the many representatives of labor present was Dan Souza, Business Agent for Local 279 of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters. His response to why he was there was simple and honest. "I'd like to see my members get the jobs they need, and I also think it is important that the residents of Port Chester receive the kind of quality work that their tax dollars will be paying for."

For hours, the Village Trustees sat and listened to the concerns of various residents, taxpayers and workers of Port Chester, who are wary of presenting Starwood Capital the gift of a hard earned \$60 million. Their caution is understandable. Now it remains to be seen if the trustees are up to the task of ensuring that they provide what is so central to the Pledge of Allegiance with which they opened - "... with liberty and justice for all."