

Opinion

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Op-Ed: Will Port Chester Get a Fair Deal from Greenwich Developer?

BY GONZALO CRUZ

Starwood Capital Group is asking for a lot from Port Chester.

The Greenwich-based private equity firm, which manages more than \$44 billion in assets, wants the Village to rezone the former United Hospital site to permit building a giant mixed-use development.

The site is already zoned for mixed-use. A rezoning would allow **Starwood** to build a bigger project and reap even larger profits. This by itself would be a generous gift from our community to our wealthy Greenwich neighbor. But **Starwood** wants even more.

The developer seeks approval of a plan that would effectively reduce its property taxes by a projected \$58.55 million over 20 years. This would cost our schools nearly \$34 million in revenue. For some perspective, \$34 million could pay the salaries of 17 additional teachers for the next 20 years and help relieve some of the overcrowding that threatens to undermine our children's education.

And that is not all. **Starwood** wants to evict tenants living in affordable apartments at the site, remove the complex from the state's successful Mitchell-Lama housing program for working families, and then demolish it. While the developer is helping the current tenants relocate, it has no plan for replacing the 133 affordable homes that Port Chester can scarcely afford to lose.

And what does **Starwood** offer Port Chester in return? The company makes some impossible-to-prove forecasts about indirect benefits for the local economy, pledges to make some roadway improvements, and offers a stingy payment of \$1 million for upgrades to public facilities. It claims this project will create hundreds of jobs without guaranteeing these jobs will go to local residents or that they will be good jobs with fair pay and benefits.

Port Chester deserves a much better deal. That is why a group of faith, housing and labor organizations are urging Mayor Pilla and Village Trustees to work with **Starwood** on a plan that better reflects the needs of our community. When the public invests in private developments like this one, they must be built and operated in a way that creates real, long-term value for both developers and communities. This principle is behind the name of our coalition: the Sustainable Port Chester Alliance.

We invite Port Chester residents, **Starwood** and the Mayor and Trustees to attend a Town Hall meeting that we're hosting on Thursday, Sept. 3 at 7 p.m. at the Knights of Columbus (327 Westchester Ave).

There, we can talk more about **Starwood**'s plan and why it should include the following community benefits:

*A guarantee that all jobs for building and running the project will be good, safe jobs, offering ample training opportunities and at least area-standard wages and benefits; with a significant portion of these jobs made available to Port Chester residents.

*A plan for 20% of the project's units to be affordable for working Port Chester families or funding from **Starwood** for the construction of an equal number of affordable units at a separate site within the Village.

*Funding for expansion of Port Chester schools to ensure this project does not exacerbate the overcrowding that our students and educators already struggle with.

*The hiring of an independent monitor to supervise cleanup and mitigation at the hospital site, which is contaminated with hazardous materials, including PCBs, human waste and asbestos.

These are measures that responsible developers have adopted at other projects without sacrificing the opportunity for sizeable returns on their investments. At the Town Hall meeting, we'll discuss how the Village and **Starwood** can partner to ensure this project rewards everyone. In the meantime, we encourage residents to attend the first public hearing on the development on Thursday, Aug. 27 at 7 p.m. at the Village Courtroom and to write the Mayor and Trustees. Tell them that the United Hospital redevelopment must truly benefit both **Starwood** and Port Chester.

Gonzalo Cruz is director of the Don Bosco Workers, Inc.