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Praise and Criticism Dished Out for Mixed Use Hospital Site Project

By Jananne Abel, Editor

Sixteen months after Starwood Capital Partners unveiled its latest plan for redevelopment of the former United Hospital site, the public got its first official opportunity under the state's environmental review process to comment on the proposal at a hearing before the Port Chester Board of Trustees. A packed village courtroom complete with workers from Build Up NY wearing fluorescent green T-shirts and carrying signs reading "Port Chester needs affordable housing" and "Good jobs for Port Chester" greeted the board on Thursday, August 27th to have their say.

Those in attendance were commenting on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement prepared for the mixed use project and accepted by the village board in July as well as affiliates of Starwood Capital Partners' request for one of two possible amendments to the village's zoning code to make way for it. Those amendments are either creating a Southern Gateway Mixed Use Overlay District, which would cover 75 acres, or amending the existing Planned Mixed Use zoning to allow for greater density.

The plan, unveiled in April 2014, was devised by Port Chester-based Street-Works, whose offices are located in the Simons Building at 181 Westchester Ave. It calls for 230 housing units for seniors ages 55+, 500 residential units targeted toward millennials, 90,000 square feet of retail/restaurant uses, 217,000 square feet of medical office/wellness use 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.



Ken Narva, managing partner of Street-Works, talks about the unique design of the mixed use development planned for the United Hospital site at the first public hearing on the project on Aug. 27 while representatives from Build-Up NY hold up signs calling for good jobs and affordable housing.

Richard Abel|Westmore News



Image representing the view looking out toward Boston Post Road from the public space toward the rear of the redeveloped hospital site.

Courtesy of The Marino Organization

It is projected that the new development will be completed in 2018 and take about 36 months to build.

Ken Narva, co-founder and managing partner of Street-Works, said this development was designed to be transformational, being built on "a 15-acre blighted site: functionally obsolete, economically obsolete and physically deteriorating." United Hospital closed 10 years ago.

"The solution being proposed is definitely transformational for the site and the village," Narva said. "It is Westchester's first mixed use neighborhood being built."

He added that the unique 1 million-square-foot project includes a tremendous amount of public space, "the largest common area of any project in Westchester," and "that was not easy to accomplish on a rock pile." The common area is 500 feet long, activated by retail, and leads to Abendroth Park which sits to the north.

Traffic remediation

Carlita Holt from TRC Engineers, Inc. explained their "out of the box approach" to traffic. "We recognize that traffic is a problem out there today," he said. "If we don't fix the problem, this project cannot be successful."

Holt said removal of the light at High Street and Boston Post Road and rerouting the traffic, allowing only right turns into and out of High Street, is the main game-changer. He talked about rerouting traffic through the site and reducing the potential for cut-through traffic.

In addition, there will be significant pedestrian improvements along the site frontage and a pedestrian crossing on Boston Post Road.

Benefits of the project

David Smith of Planning & Development Advisors enumerated the benefits of the development: 1,800 construction-related jobs, 972 permanent jobs, 730 new residences with disposable income, a onetime payment for new schoolchildren entering the district and a \$2.975 million Payment in Lieu of Taxes, of which \$1.19 million is proposed to go to the village and \$1.785 million to the Port Chester School District.

If a density bonus is granted, the applicant proposes a \$1 million payment for improvement of the following public resources: \$250,000 towards a new municipal service facility, \$250,000 towards the village waterfront and marina, \$250,000 towards Fox Island peninsula redevelopment and \$250,000 towards the provision of dedicated open space or enclosed program space anywhere in the village.

Anthony Gioffre of Cuddy & Feder, the attorney representing the applicant, handed over a stack of postcards received from people supporting the project as a result of a mailing. He also read a letter of support from the Business Council of Westchester and another from former Mayor Neil Pagano.

Public speaks out

First to address the board once the public was allowed to speak was Robert Johnson, president of the Port Chester Board of Education. He said the school board was concerned that they were not named on a list of interested agencies in the 400-page environmental document. "This is a concern as this project will have a significant impact," he said. "We ask that we be included."

In addition, the projection for a yield of 23-34 schoolchildren from the development's residential units is far too low, he said. "Five hundred units will yield far more than 34 children." Johnson added that there are 27 children coming from the 100-unit Mariner apartment building.

The school board also does not agree with the figures being used for the hard and soft costs related to additional students to be generated. "They are unrealistic."

"If the village is to proceed with the project, we ask you to consider the impact it will have on the school district," he concluded.

City of Rye well represented

Laura Brett, a member of the Rye City Council, said they have had a consultant prepare specific comments relating to traffic impacts but that in general the applicant's traffic study doesn't include a broad enough area, "doesn't go far enough into the City of Rye." There are also "some uncertainties around the rezoning" and it is not clear "how the overlay zone impacts the entire area."

Later five Rye City residents from the neighborhood off High Street voiced their concerns.

Garth Schultz of 70 Ridge St. said "I think this project is too big for the space. I don't think it fits where you put 1,500 people and 1,500 cars into 15 acres."

He said traffic was a major concern and the city had an independent consultant review it. "The tiny little area they looked at needs to be expanded," he said.

"I don't think it should be approved in its current form," Schultz concluded. "They should go back to the drawing board and reduce it."

Richard Smith of 127 Evergreen Ave. was worried about traffic as well as the construction period. "That site is a pile of rock. Some of us who live nearby are wondering how that process is going to work."

He ended by saying that "this will have a major impact on our neighborhood."

John Seller of 12 Evergreen Ave. said he is a Port Chester native whose family goes way back in the village. "We realize it is a space that needs to be developed," he said, but had the same issues as his neighbors-traffic and construction.

"The overlay plan concerns me even more," he added. "It could mean the area where Kohl's is could be developed in the future and create even more traffic."

"I want this to work, but I want to be included in the process," Seller said in closing.

Recurring themes from Build Up NY reps

Recurring themes from the Build Up NY union workers in attendance, some local, some from out of town, some speaking in English, others in Spanish with translation, were that the project should provide good, safe jobs with decent wages and benefits and should include affordable housing units.

Some also said Starwood should not get a tax break.

"They should create affordable housing and pay their fair share of taxes," said Arturo Mantilla, a 30-year resident of Port Chester.

"I believe the Starwood project is a good project," said José Torres, also a longtime Port Chester resident, "but only if they sign an agreement that they will provide good jobs for our community." He added that "I am also concerned about how this project will affect our school district." Torres works at the Hilton Westchester in Rye Brook.

A voice from Sustainable Port Chester Alliance

Gonzalo Cruz of 33 Poningo St., executive director of the Don Bosco Workers who is working with the Sustainable Port Chester Alliance, said he wanted to "make sure Port Chester residents get some of the jobs" and that Starwood uses responsible contractors and includes affordable housing in their project.

The Sustainable Port Chester Alliance scheduled a Sept. 3 forum at the Knights of Columbus Hall to discuss "how village residents and Starwood can benefit from responsible development." It was not clear as of press time exactly who would be attending.

Vocal supporters

The hearing also brought out vocal supporters such as Deborah Bradshaw of Westchester Avenue whose family has a long history in the village.

"Do we want to be seen as Port Chester, a wonderful place to live and work?" she asked. "Port Chester has friendly people and is a good village that is so close to being a great village. This is a project that will get us there."

"Say yes to this proposal and no to affordable houses," said Adelo Ramirez of 44 Haseco Ave. "I am so in favor of this project. It will attract a younger crowd that will start generating income for everyone else. I own a business at 6 North Pearl St. and I need this crowd."

"Port Chester deserves this project," said lifelong village resident Chris Pierro of 85 Breckenridge Ave. After 10 years, he feels it should be fast tracked.

"What is wrong with new kids coming into town from middle class neighborhoods?" Pierro asked. "They may raise the bar for kids who are struggling."

999 High St. represented

Audrey Moore represented the residents of 999 High St. who are slated to be displaced by the Starwood development. Most are former United Hospital employees.

"We are not against economic growth in Port Chester," she said. "We helped build Port Chester. We decided to band together to make sure our neighbors will be okay. We truly appreciate the efforts that have been put forth to make sure our families will be okay."

"Starwood has made time to have serious discussions with us, allowing us to believe there is some kind of humanity in this project," she added. "We don't know where we are going. We looked to you and we didn't feel supported by you," she said, referring to the board. She thanked Starwood and Port Chester builder Lou Larizza, calling both of them "compassionate."

What's next

A second public hearing on the Starwood development's environmental impact and proposed zoning changes will be held on Tuesday, Sept. 8 in the village courtroom at 350 North Main St. starting at 7 p.m. Written comments will be accepted through Sept. 25. Additional hearings may be scheduled as needed. Once the hearings are completed, a Final Environmental Impact Statement will be prepared incorporating all substantive comments, oral or written, and responding to them.

It is possible that the board may fold the idea of one or more workshops into public hearings with a targeted topic for discussion that night, as had been suggested at a July meeting by Trustee Dan Brakewood. If that is done, it would become part of the FEIS, explained Port Chester Planner Jesica Youngblood.