

The Rye City Review

Affordable Housing Mulled at United Hospital Site



The redevelopment process of the vacant United Hospital site near the Rye border garnered tons of public comment during the Village of Port Chester's Board of Trustees meeting on August 27th, including the prospects of affordable housing and job creation.

Photo/Andrew Dapolite

By Jackson Chen

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As the Village of Port Chester completes its first round of public hearings for a redevelopment of a long-abandoned hospital, an organization is calling on the village to create affordable housing and permanent jobs at the 15-acre project.

The large-scale development is slated to repurpose the decrepit lot of the former United Hospital, which sits along Boston Post Road near an entryway to the City of Rye. After its abrupt closing in 2005, the hospital was purchased by Starwood Capital Group, a Connecticut-based investment firm, in 2006 for \$28 million.

Years into the purchase, Starwood presented its third iteration of an extensive redevelopment plan to the village in April 2014. After two plans accounting for more than 800 units was rejected by the village, the now-roughly \$300 million project would create 730 residential units, parking structures, retail and office space and a 138-room hotel. Since the Port Chester Board of Trustees recently deemed Starwood's draft environmental impact statement as complete, the public was allowed to begin its comment on the massive project.

"We heard from many members of the public, both inside Port Chester, Rye and throughout the area," said Port Chester Mayor Dennis Pilla, a Democrat. "Some people spoke favorably about the project; others challenged the traffic concerns, letting all the kids into the schools.

Comments poured into the village courtroom during the board's first public hearing on Aug. 27. Dozens of residents donned bright green T-shirts with the logo of Build Up NYC, an organization dedicated to improving conditions for the working middle class. Several residents spoke on behalf of the organization to voice their strong opinions on how the village should be tackling this project.

“We don’t have enough affordable housing here in Port Chester,” said Cecilio Silvestre, a nine-year resident of the village. “In these difficult economic times, working families need good jobs and affordable housing.”

Silvestre added that the extensive project would create tons of jobs, which should provide middle-class wages with benefits to village families, once the hotels and retail spaces are completed.

Many residents voiced their approval for creating affordable housing units and providing stable jobs to the residents of the village. While Port Chester is an excluded community from Westchester County’s settlement with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development that required the construction of 750 units of affordable housing, the mayor said that it was important regardless of any legal requirements.

“Many people in our community need good jobs,” Javier Valdovinos said. “The hundreds of jobs created by this development could go a long way to reducing poverty if Starwood committed that all of the construction, hotel and maintenance jobs would pay fair wages with benefits.”

Representatives of Build Up NYC also called on the village for a responsible development process and emphasized that the draft environmental study revealed a likely presence of hazardous medical substances.

As for the post-construction process, Build Up NYC was also concerned with Starwood’s proposal to contribute a \$3 million payment in lieu of taxes each year. According to the organization, Starwood would be paying \$1.7 million less per year.

Since the current abandoned hospital’s lot is also home to an affordable housing complex on 999 High St., Starwood’s demolition of the properties would result in the village losing out 133 units of affordable housing that were created through the state-run 1955 Mitchell-Lama affordable housing program.

According to Pilla, Starwood also submitted an alternative plan to keep the 999 High St. complex intact while building around it. However, the mayor said the board is carefully considering the pros and cons of each option.

Even with the lengthy discussions during its first public hearing, the Starwood redevelopment discussions will continue on Sept. 8, after press time, according to Pilla, who added that public comment may continue for as long as Sept. 25. The mayor said that once the public hearing is closed, the village’s consultants would incorporate comments and questions into the final environmental impact statement, which is expected to also include its effects on nearby municipalities, like the City of Rye.

According to Rye’s Deputy Mayor Laura Brett, a Republican, the city’s main concerns include the carryover impact of increased traffic congestion.

“The major concern we have about the traffic impacts,” Brett said of Starwood’s draft environmental impact statement, “is that it doesn’t include a broad enough area and doesn’t go far enough into the City of Rye to truly evaluate what those impacts are.”

Brett added that the city’s consultants review Starwood’s draft environmental impact statement and said that it covers too small an area for them to understand the impacts on Rye.

For the village mayor, Port Chester’s board is still in the listening phase of the public hearings process and is withholding any judgment. As for Rye’s comments, Pilla said Starwood still has a lot of work to do, and he expects that everyone will work collaboratively throughout the process.

Since it’s still early in the public hearings, Pilla said the village board is expecting to create a schedule of various workshops aimed at addressing specific environmental concerns like traffic congestion, impact on taxes and increased school enrollment, at its Sept. 8 meeting.

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