

Naysayers Critique Project for Hospital Site

Third hearing focusing on traffic set for Monday, September 21st

By Jananne Abel, Editor

A second official opportunity for the public to speak to the Port Chester Board of Trustees on Starwood Capital Partners' latest mixed use plan for redevelopment of the former United Hospital site under the state's environmental review process again resulted in a packed courtroom and standing room only on Tuesday, September 8.

Once again Build Up NY had a good representation of people bearing signs and speaking on behalf of union members in Port Chester. They spoke about the substantial tax break Starwood is proposed to receive, the need for work safety on the construction site, the need for good-paying construction jobs, concern about the project causing overcrowding of the schools and the need for affordable housing.

Leonore Friedlander, executive director of Build Up NY, said there should be a clear and legally enforceable community benefits agreement with Starwood to provide good jobs and infrastructure improvements and give priority hiring to Port Chester residents.

"We want to make sure it is transformative in a positive way for the residents of Port Chester," she said.

The plan, unveiled in April 2014, was devised by Port Chester-based Street-Works. 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.

Many speakers also came out once again from the City of Rye and particularly the neighborhood adjacent to the development off High Street.

This time, however, Mayor Joe Sack led off the conversation. He said the project "is on top of Rye and would suffocate Rye," having "significant negative impacts on the city which may not be able to be mitigated" because of its "sheer and massive size."

Sack reminded the village board of the "long and contentious [legal] dispute regarding Home Depot," which dragged on for seven years.

"I raise it as a matter of fact," he said, adding that "Home Depot pales in comparison to the proposed United Hospital project."

"There is no reason for that to be repeated," he said, "but the impacts must be mitigated. That has not happened to any significant degree." He cited traffic, pedestrian safety, visual impacts and more.

"We would like to work with you, mayor, rather than work against you," said Mayor Sack to Port Chester Mayor Dennis Pilla. "The time of Home Depot disputes has long past, but we in the City of Rye like to stand up for our community."

Port Chester Board of Education President Robert Johnson was more eloquent at this hearing than at the last, rejecting the one-time mitigation fee for the school district, disputing the number of schoolchildren the project is projected to generate, saying that the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the project fails to consider the impact on pedestrian traffic for kids walking to school, opposing a 20-year Payment in Lieu of Taxes for the project and more.

For a mitigation fee, "we propose a variable annual payment based on actual enrollment," he said.

"We will have a school impact and financial considerations workshop and invite the school board to participate," responded Mayor Pilla.

Deirdre Lester of 110 Evergreen Ave., corner of High Street in Rye, executive vice president of a media company targeting millennials, agreed with Johnson that "Starwood grossly underestimates the number of children, calling millennials "the next generation of baby boomers."

Kim Morabito from the Port Chester Recreation Commission spoke about a feasibility study for recreation in Abendroth Park behind the proposed development which "will form the backdrop view of many residential units" and said the redevelopment of the park to create sports facilities "should be covered as part of the overall United Hospital development."

Joan Grangenois Thomas, president of the Port Chester-Rye NAACP, was an advocate of a community benefits agreement with Starwood, proposed an apprenticeship program as part of this project and said history should be taken into account.

Attorney Tom Kennedy representing the Sustainable Port Chester Alliance said the environmental study inflates the project's economic benefits and grossly inflates the number of jobs it will create. In addition, he said, it "will not deliver a living wage to the 1,000 people they predict will be employed."

Kennedy added that the DEIS "ignores the negative impact on the working class" and "fails to take into consideration the way Starwood treats its workers."

"This DEIS should be regarded as dead on arrival," he concluded.

"If this deal should go through, it is going to be the fiscal equivalent of a tax increase for everyone in Port Chester because of the unintended consequences," said Robert Reis of 70 Munson St. after enumerating the negative effect it will have on the Port Chester public schools.

Richard Hyman of Lafayette Drive rattled off the many approved developments in Westchester that are including affordable housing and added that "affordable housing hasn't prevented the developers from making money."

"I am in favor of this project," he concluded, "but I think you have a moral responsibility that 133 of the [730 planned] housing units be workforce housing because that is the number you are losing."

The Starwood plan calls for 999 High St., which contains 133 units of affordable housing, be torn down and does not propose any affordable residences.

"Far too often we get lost by listening to some of the naysayers," said former Port Chester Trustee Joe Rende. "I can't emphasize enough how important it is for you gentlemen to deliberate and deliberate

quickly. So many times in the past gentlemen like you have failed to bring in development because of protracted decision-making."

"This has been great, balanced input that we have received," responded Mayor Pilla, adding that there was a desire to have deeper dives on traffic, schools and financial viability. The first deep dive in the area of traffic will take place on Monday, Sept. 21 as a continuation of this public hearing.

"It's hard to say the questions can be answered," said Mark Chertok, the village's consulting attorney. "Those answers will be in the Final EIS. I call it a topic specific hearing on traffic."

It will be followed by similar hearings concentrating on the other two subjects.

"We can certainly provide a more thorough presentation on these topics," said Anthony Gioffre, attorney for the developer. "This is not going to be a full back and forth."

"Presumably the public will also benefit," said Chertok.

Comments on other subjects related to the project will also be welcomed.

"I think it would go a long way to have our consultant speak," said Rye Mayor Sack.

The village's traffic consultants will also make comments at Monday's hearing after Starwood's engineer's presentation.

Monday's hearing will start at 7 p.m. in the courtroom at 350 North Main St.