

Mahackeno battle heats up as flyer attacks Y plan

BY BONNIE ADLER

As the March 13 date approaches for the Westport Weston Family Y to present its application for a new 100,000-square-foot facility at its Mahackeno campus to the Planning and Zoning Commission, the battle being fought behind the scenes is getting more contentious.

Halstead countered Ancel's statement that 10 or more minutes would be added to residents' driving times every day as a direct result of the presence of the new facility, calling her statement "exaggerated." Halstead said that extensive traffic reports submitted with the application would be subject "to a careful and thorough review by experts hired by the town and paid for by the Family Y." He adds, "According to the submitted studies, there is not even one spot at any hour of the day that will even reach one tenth of Ms. Ancel's claim." Halstead suggested allowing the town's experts to determine the credibility of the information.

The latest in a series of attacks from opponents of the Y's plan came in a flyer entitled "Say No to Mahackeno," dated Jan. 15.

The fundraising flyer was written by District 3 RTM representative Amy Ancel and was distributed to Old Hill residents.

The flyer predicts severe and negative repercussions to the Old Hill neighborhood should the new Mahackeno facility be approved and asked for finan-

cial contributions to be sent to the address of an officer of "Y Downtown," an association formed to keep the Family Y in the downtown area of Westport.

Westport resident Steve Halstead, a former chairman of the Board of Education and husband of Rosemary Halstead, a member of the board of directors of the Family Y, wrote a let-

statement that 10 or more minutes would be added to residents' driving times every day as a direct result of the presence of the new facility, calling her statement "exaggerated." Halstead said that extensive traffic reports submitted with the application would be subject "to a careful and thorough review by experts hired by the town and paid for by the Family Y." He adds, "According to the submitted studies, there is not even one spot at any hour of the day that will even reach one tenth of Ms. Ancel's claim." Halstead suggested allowing the town's experts to determine the credibility of the information.

"Taxpayer-supported local and state experts will be involved in the review process in addition to the objective consultants hired by the town," he said.

He took further issue with Ancel's claim that the Old Hill area is a "residential only district" that should be protected from what she called "commercial encroachments." He clarified that all single family residentially zoned properties are subject to Special Permit uses, such as the type the Family Y is looking for. Citing specific zoning regulations Halstead said, "Special Permits are granted to government buildings, schools, daycare centers, places of worship, country clubs . . . etc.," adding that there are stringent requirements to establish any such use under a strict set of guidelines.

"Trying to use inflammatory word images like 'commercial encroachment' to cast the Y like some out of place commercial office complex belies not only the law, but also the position this important institution has in our community," said Halstead.

Halstead also noted that the flyer claims the opponents are "working tirelessly to protect your property values." "No factual information is provided that supports the claim of negative impact. The Y's application contains information that the new facility will have no measurable impact on "Old Hill Area" property values. Are there people who would prefer not to live next door to the Y? Sure. Are there also people who would love to have this community amenity in their backyard? Absolutely."

In a telephone interview with the Minuteman, Halstead said, "We are entering a cycle of fear, uncertainty and doubt. A strategy of misinformation is a key tactic which discourages the ability of citizens to respect the processes we have."

Amy Ancel told the Minuteman she based her estimate of 10 additional minutes of driv-

ing time on a comment made by Family Y Board of Directors President Bruce Iain at a community meeting in 2005 in response to complaints about traffic. Ancel said, "Bruce said that 'everybody would have to get up ten minutes earlier each day.'"

Ancel said her comments about the negative impact on property values was based on real estate appraiser Michael Gold's comment in the application that it is common knowledge that more traffic on a road impacts property values. She said Gold evaluated two properties on Sunny Lane and said they would suffer a five percent reduction in property values that would be alleviated with trees and roadway improvements.

Ancel added that the Town Plan of Conservation and Development of 2008 should protect residential neighborhoods from commercial development.