

Letters to the Editor

Westfield's Town Challenge: Advance Public Policy That Benefits Property Owners and Builders

Editor's note: The following is copy of comments made before the Westfield Planning Board at its special meeting on May 18 on a proposed ordinance to change zoning regulations for residential housing in town.

I want to compliment council members Foerst, Caruana and Echausse for their work in bringing this issue forward for public discussion.

The information developed by these council members over the past few years clearly supports the community's concern over the significant increase in the number of demolished residences followed by the construction of new buildings that frequently push the limits of appropriateness for our community.

Clearly, the challenge facing the town is to advance public policy that benefits both individual Westfield property owners and those who make their living through construction. In considering this challenge, I would urge this board and the council to address a matter not covered by the amendments, namely, the process by which this "tear-down/build-up" construction is approved.

Currently, the town council must approve by resolution the demolition of a building. This requirement puts the proposed action on the public docket and requires the applicant to have that action vetted in a public forum. While this is important, affected property owners often are unaware of the demolition - having other business or personal concerns or are away - and few likely scan the council's agenda with any regularity. Further, this council process does not consider the suitability of the replacement building on the site and in the neighborhood where construction will take place.

If a developer demolishes a house and then proposes a new building that meets all of the code requirements, i.e., requires no approval for variances, then the entire approval process remains a matter solely between the developer and the building department. Adjacent homeowners are not party to the process unless they hap-

pen to learn about it on their own and then act on that information in a timely fashion.

I believe that the construction of a new building should be subject to planning board approval and that adjacent property owners should be provided sufficient information to allow them an opportunity to comment on the plans at a public meeting of the board.

My reasoning is very straightforward. Tearing down a building and then constructing a new one is not just an exercise in land use ordinance mathematics. Such actions - and they obviously happen more frequently now - have the potential to radically change the character of the neighborhood in which the construction occurs. Affected property owners can bring additional scrutiny to the project and identify concerns that the building department may inadvertently overlook. "Tear-down/build-up" construction can change a neighborhood and as such warrants community examination.

The goal of my proposal is to protect the neighborhood from unintended - yet possibly undesired - consequences that are difficult to remedy after construction begins. I can speak from personal experience on that matter. Affected property owners should not face loss of property values from significant changes to the aesthetics of their property nor incur the cost of protecting against hazards or other outcomes.

So, my recommendation to you is that the land use ordinances be amended to:

Require the town and/or developer to send "Notice of Demolition" letters to adjacent homeowners before permission is given via council resolution.

Require the planning board to approve site plans for any new construction that follows demolition at a site and to provide appropriate notification to adjacent homeowners allowing their participation in the approval hearing.

Neither of these suggestions is very radical. Notification practices occur now when certain items go before boards. Clearly, having an adjacent building de-

molished and a new one erected is a sufficiently traumatic event that it should not slip under the neighborhood radar screen. The notification system that currently exists does not favor those neighbors.

I also would like to suggest to council members that if they take my suggestions seriously, they cannot expect to be lobbied heavily by developers who will want my proposal to go away. The developers will argue that such steps will slow down their activities and affect their businesses. Your response should be "Exactly!" Careful review of the neighborhood consequences of "tear-down/build-up" construction is as important as the various formulas that the council has created to change the physical dimensions of these buildings.

I can think of few local issues as contentious as the issue of "redeveloping Westfield." Most of us moved here because this community has a certain character that we saw as unique and attractive. Westfield can lose that character in small increments - one tear down at a time - and these incremental changes will escape our collective notice until that character is gone. While we cannot stop change, we can make it visible. The age of transparency has arrived.

Richard Trabert  
Westfield

WF Resident Shares Border Patrol Concerns

I wonder if Westfielders share my puzzlement that Al Garza, Generalissimo of the grandiosely named "Minuteman Civil Defense Corps," has chosen to reach out to us from Huachuca City, Arizona to share his enlightened thoughts on unlawful immigration. In Garza's distorted and conspiracy-laden view of the world, it is of no consequence that the native-born Timothy McVeigh and a group of lawfully credentialed Arab visitors, rather than the undocumented Mexican gardeners and dishwashers that he fears, perpetrated the two greatest terrorist acts on our soil. As if the Border Patrol doesn't face sufficient challenges, it must now contend, not only with unlawful migrants, but also with a self-appointed comic-opera posse of interfering right-wing zealots.

There's nothing inherently wrong with role-playing. It can fulfill a harmless and constructive function in safely addressing mild psychosexual disorders. While they are hardly mainstream preoccupations, leather or lace fantasies tend to be creepy, but ultimately benign. Yet, there is a profound and disturbing difference between mundane role-playing and a pack of military wannabes who fancy themselves as uber-commandos. Let's make no mistake about this: The Field Marshall and his ragtag troops pose an infinitely greater threat to our democracy.

In usurping and interfering in a legitimate law enforcement function to pursue their extremist agenda, the Minutemen demonstrate a cavalier and un-American attitude toward the rule of law. In that regard, they are little more than a lynch mob. In a recent televised speech advocating his amnesty plan, President Bush pledged to devote adequate resources to patrolling our borders. Hopefully, this effort will not only involve curtailing unlawful immigration, but scattering the militia nuts, as well.

Robert Ratner  
Westfield

SP-F Parent Says Eliminating Cupcakes is Not a Solution

It seems that balance and creativity have joined common sense as extinct practices amongst some members of the Scotch Plains-Fanwood school system.

The latest victim of this trend toward ill-conceived and quick fix solutions to solve modern day societal problems is the dreaded cupcake. No longer can the cupcake or other dessert be served and enjoyed in our schools' in celebrations of children's birthdays.

This is due to the conception that childhood obesity will magically disappear once cupcakes are no longer part of a child's birthday celebration.

However, I submit that elimination of cupcakes or any other dessert to be enjoyed at a child's birthday will have no effect whatsoever on childhood obesity nor will it teach children about proper nutrition.

This elimination will have no positive effect due to a lack of balance in the approach to teach our children positive eating habits. Likewise, this total elimination of treats during a birthday celebration fails to address the many causes of obesity, which is so prevalent in our society.

In general, one of the causes of obesity amongst children today can be directly attributable to our hectic lifestyle. Quick-fix solutions do not address how technology, by way of children spending countless hours surfing the internet rather than engaging in physical activity by playing in our local parks, has contributed to obesity. Quick-fix solutions do not address the surge in spending by parents for takeout food in restaurants versus cooking at home because of time constraints. Quick-fix solutions also do not address the economic disparity between parents that can afford pricey, though often healthier organic foods and parents who are forced to feed their families cheaper, highly processed foods and 99 cent fast food so-called "value meals."

Why have we eliminated balance from our world? Why do we insist on being afraid to debate and thoroughly discuss the issues that face our society today? It is argued that serving treats during a child's birthday party will take away from valuable instructional time during the school day.

Is there not one teacher who is creative enough to realize that math and science are key ingredients to every cupcake, or anything you bake for that matter? I imagine you could utilize classroom time to teach children about the math of weights

and measures or the chemical process that takes place during the baking of those birthday cupcakes, couldn't you?

You could take this opportunity to teach children about balance. Balance, in the sense that you teach children that cupcakes and other desserts are eaten throughout the world, amongst many ethnic and religious groups, not every day, but occasionally in celebration of certain events such as birthdays.

If diminished instructional time were a real concern, the Board of Education should consider elimination of the annual hiatus to Atlantic City versus getting rid of the cupcake during a birthday party.

Finally, while I respect the job our superintendent has done over the years, I must disagree with Supt. Choye's decision to support this ban on cupcakes during children's school day birthday parties.

If Superintendent Choye is convinced that prohibition of cupcakes for birthday parties is the solution to our nutritional woes, does that mean no dessert at her retirement party?

Tony Patti  
Scotch Plains



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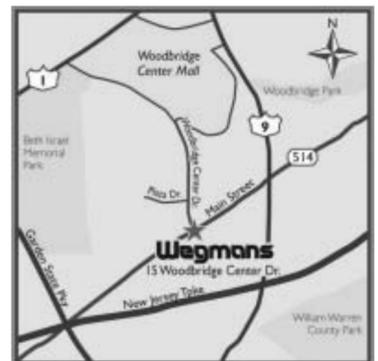
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