

Opinion

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The Journal News | Monday, January 28, 2008

OUR VIEWS

The Reader's Digest site

An improved scheme emerges for an iconic site

In the last go round, developers Summit Development and Greenfield Partners of Norwalk, Conn., who hope to turn the bucolic Reader's Digest campus into an active senior citizen development, completely misread the Chappaqua community. Their proposal — for 348 condominiums in buildings up to five stories tall — was rejected in 2006 for painfully obvious reasons. It was too big for a community that prides itself on country living; it was too dense for a beloved and historic property; and it had little but increased property tax revenue to recommend it. Some in wealthy Chappaqua have reportedly scoffed at the notion that their community even needs tax relief.

But that was before the developers scaled back the size of the development by 20 percent, added a conscience-saving affordable-housing component and brought in consultants who have crafted a proposal that is now more sensitive to the community's demands. Now, it's clear, the developers "get" Chappaqua.

A new vision

This updated proposal for Chappaqua Crossing includes 278 units of housing in townhouses up to three stories tall. The bulk of the housing, 222 units, would be market-rate housing for those 55 and older; another 24 units would be affordable units for the same age group; and 32 units would be affordable housing for families, intended for municipal employees or town volunteers.

The proposal takes into account residents' concerns about the cost of adding more children to the prestigious Chappaqua schools and would forbid residency by anyone younger than 18 in all but the 32 units set aside for families. The developers insist that this age restriction will withstand legal challenge — a concern raised by some

Reader's Digest neighbors.

On paper, Chappaqua Crossing would also help address another community concern — New Castle's obligation to provide affordable housing, a need that has gone ignored for too long throughout the county. The Westchester County Housing Opportunity Commission has said New Castle will need 255 units of affordable housing by 2015. It has taken years to build just three. At that snail's pace, New Castle will find it increasingly hard to retain the kind of residents who work in municipal offices, or the library, or the schools — the kinds of neighbors

who make time to volunteer at the ambulance corps and the fire department. In weighing this proposal, the New Castle Town Board should consider the benefits that economic diversity will bring to the community. (If the community loses this volunteer base for lack of affordable housing and has to pay for emergency services, it could need those scoffed at extra tax dollars.)

What they want

Under the proposed plan, the developers would retain for commercial tenants the iconic brick Reader's Digest building so familiar to motorists on the Saw Mill River Parkway, though they have plans to remove 180,000 square feet from one end of the structure. To accommodate their designs, the developers are seeking a rezoning of the property. They want the town to lift a restriction of only four tenants in the remaining 520,000 square foot building, and they want to split the property into two separate zoning districts — 49 acres for the commercial space and 64 acres of multi-family planned development.

There is little question that the Reader's Digest property is big enough to accommodate both commercial uses and a multi-family development — without encroaching on wetlands and while leaving ample amount of open space as a buffer to existing neighbors. Surely residents of New Castle will have objections to the plan; some have already been heard and addressed. That is what the long environmental-review process is for. In 2006, the town rejected the plan without a full environmental review. There is enough good in this new proposal to merit a fair review by the town community.

Now, it's clear, the developers "get" Chappaqua.

Speak out

Join the discussion on Chappaqua Crossing in the New Castle forum at LoHud.com.

