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Southold Town Board  
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Dear Board:

Last fall at a public Island Community Board meeting the Fishers Island School (FIS) and Walsh Park (WP) announced their intent to convey and develop some school property on Winthrop Avenue. If WP could successfully gain a zoning change, it would pay the FIS \$410,000 to purchase the property for the development of 4 two family affordable homes.

The plan immediately sparked a deep and rancorous community division and a subsequent letter writing campaign. Then Covid – 19 hit. After a 5 month intermission the issue abruptly reemerged, and it was announced that the Planning Board would render their recommendation in 5 days. Their decision unanimously supported the COZ. On the strength of the PB's memo and their recommendation it is likely that the Town Board will decide to set a public hearing at their next meeting.

The PB's recommendation seems largely consistent with the identified goals set forth in the admirable Comprehensive Plan. But in its memo, and absent from the Comprehensive Plan, is any consideration of the Covid-19 consequences.

As several letters submitted to the PB pointed out, Covid 19 has, and promises to have, significant island impacts. Relevant to the issues at hand are the impacts on the year round and school populations. Both have experienced significant increases. At least 10 local students have recently been enrolled – a gain of more than 30%, which brings overall enrollment to a level that threatens certain school capacities. Hard numbers for new year round residents are not as available, but anecdotal information suggests they are considerable. Considering that both the FIS and WP have justified the transaction as a remedy to these population issues, these developments must be taken into consideration.

Covid 19 promises other consequences, none of which can be beneficial to the local economy or our municipal finances. While the extent of the resulting damage may be speculative, it is a near certainty that property tax and cost of living will have to absorb increasing costs. Such increases will likely stress the existing local population. The proposed WP development will divert resources, and likely aggravate the situation.

Besides Covid 19, the Walsh Park Benevolent Corporation itself raises concerns. They are struggling to complete their 6 unit Ferry development. This will bring their "portfolio" of local affordable units to about 35. The pre Covid 19 estimate of local residents is about 230. This suggests that Walsh Park is

landlord to something more than 20% of the local population. While WP is a not for profit organization, it does not conform to local regulations for affordable housing. It has become a dominant and powerful local institution with little or no local accountability.

Walsh Park's outsized influence makes it nearly impossible to hold them accountable. For example, if the Town Board opts to approve the COZ, then the Fishers Island School is required to hold a public referendum. But a majority of the School Board has a serious conflict of interest. The President is a WP tenant, another board member is their manager, and another owns a contracting firm with a long professional history of performing WP work. And, as mentioned before, a significant portion of the year round population are tenants. These influences make an impartial hearing or referendum unlikely. It is far better that this issue be decided by the Town Board who is insulated from these local conflicts.

The Fishers Island School has publicly stated that it hopes to realize two benefits from the proposed transactions. The 410,000 in cash will help offset a contemplated 8 million dollar capital spending program, and the increased affordable housing stock will help support student enrollment. But the offset is less than 5% and not terribly significant. More importantly, such funding needs should be provided by the school's special powers to tax and to issue bonds. Such an approach ensures that the burden is properly distributed amongst all taxpayers. In contrast the proposed plan unfairly burdens a small neighborhood with special costs. And, as mentioned above, the other benefit has been made moot by Covid.

The damage already experienced by this contentious issue is deep and extensive. Some neighbors, feeling dismissed and betrayed, are seriously considering leaving. This despite lifelong commitments to the island and its varied causes. The social fabric has been irreparably torn, and if the Board green lights the project, it will be even worse. The Board is in an unenviable position. They are being asked to arbitrate a dispute from a perch that provides little view of all of the nuances and dynamics at play. The Board has been placed in this position in part by the refusal of WP to seek accommodation and compromise with its neighbors.

To some degree any change in zoning is a breach of contract. Inevitably some will benefit and others will suffer. Presumably a request for a change must, like eminent domain, have a compelling, public goal to justify the action. It was unclear that WP met that criteria before Covid hit, it is clear in this post covid world that they have not. Accordingly, I would urge that the Board if not reject, then delay this COZ request.

Thanks for your consideration.

Bob Evans