

White Plains debates open-space zoning that would hit French-American School

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WHITE PLAINS — The public hearing was on a proposal to create a new zoning district aimed at protecting open space at six city properties, but most of the comments at Monday night's Common Council meeting focused on just one — the former Ridgeway Country Club, where the French-American School of New York has applied for a special permit to build a \$60 million campus.

The Open Space Recreational District would affect the former Ridgeway property, the Fenway, Westchester Hills and Maple Moor golf courses, the Hutchinson River Parkway Reservation and the Mamaroneck River East Branch.

Any future development of those sites, if the new zoning is approved, would require 100- to 300-foot buffers and allow construction on just 5 percent of the land.

FASNY lawyer Michael Zarin urged the council to drop the open-space proposal, which he described as “extreme,” and said that, if adopted, it “would render the proposed FASNY school un-buildable, and leave the property with little if any economic value.”

“Let's review the (FASNY application) on its merits,” Zarin said, “and not get forced into this confused, and I would submit, muddled process regarding the OSRD.”

The new zoning was recommended in June 2011 after months of work by the city Planning Department and outside consultants that began just as FASNY purchased the 129-acre Ridgeway property for \$11 million.

FASNY bought the property to consolidate its Larchmont, Mamaroneck and Scarsdale schools onto one campus. In May 2011, the school applied for a special permit to construct facilities for 1,200 students and 200 to 250 staff members.

Plans call for academic buildings, athletic fields and parking to be clustered on 46 acres along the Ridgeway side of the property, with the remaining 80 acres to be used as public open space for passive recreation.

The plan has been vigorously opposed by neighbors, mostly members of the Gedney Association, who say the FASNY plan will cause traffic problems, reduce home values, exacerbate flooding and reduce open space.

“This is one of the last large tracts of land in White Plains,” neighborhood resident Harriet Baker told the council, “so it's important to preserve this area. ... Once these large tracts of land are gone, they're gone forever. It's wrong to develop this land in any way. I'd like to see it preserved as open space.”

Gedney Association President Terrence Guerriere said of the proposed zoning district: “We support actions that preserve open space and preserve the character of all the surrounding neighborhoods.”

Mischa Zabotin, chairman of the FASNY board of trustees, said the school “is committed to the concept of preserving open space and protecting community character,” as demonstrated by the 80-acre conservancy contained in its plan.

“It's certainly not a commitment that FASNY could sustain if the open space redistricting is passed as proposed, particularly with respect to its lot coverage and setback requirements,” he said.

A second public hearing on the zoning proposal is expected to be held Oct. 1.