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Environmentalists back school's 'greens-to-green' plan

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The French-American School of New York (FASNY) has the "strong support" of environmental leaders and educators united behind its proposal to build a school campus on the site of a former country club and make an unused golf course a model for "undevelopment" and privately funded environmental conservation in White Plains.

FASNY proposes to consolidate its three existing Westchester schools at the former Ridgeway Country Club at 400 Ridgeway Ave. and turn the private golf course into the Greens to Green Conservancy, an 84-acre nature preserve that will be open to the public.

The proposal will be the subject of a public hearing Wednesday night, when the White Plains Common Council begins its review of FASNY's draft environmental impact statement for the project.

The project has been strongly opposed by neighboring homeowners in the Gedney Association who claim the school's tax-exempt status will deprive the city of property tax and sales tax revenue and the development will further burden taxpayers with added infrastructure costs. Opponents claim building a 1,200-student school campus would violate the city's comprehensive plan and create unmanageable traffic congestion in the historic Gedney Farms neighborhood.

In a Sept. 12 letter to Mayor Thomas M. Roach and the Common Council, 16 environmental leaders said the private school and the plan to maintain a permanent, publicly accessible nature preserve, at no cost to the city, on two-thirds of the property "will deliver significant social, environmental, educational and economic benefits to White Plains and its citizens."

The Greens to Green Conservancy would be the largest privately owned conservation easement in lower and central Westchester County and the first conservation easement in White Plains, according to FASNY officials.

At a FASNY-hosted press conference announcing the united support from environmentalists, Kevin Carter, executive director of Teatown Lake Reservation in Yorktown, said, "We see this as a model for how we can take developed land and turn it back into ecologically functioning systems."

Katie Ginsberg, executive director of the Children's Environmental Literacy Foundation in Chappaqua, said FASNY's planned "undevelopment" of the chemically fertilized and maintained golf course acreage provides a "tremendous" learning opportunity. "We're rarely provided an opportunity for kids to see what happens when you take care of land," she said.

FASNY spokesman Geoffrey Thompson noted the FASNY project also has the support of the county's two largest business groups, The Business Council of Westchester and the Westchester County Association.

He said the support of a private development from so many environmental groups "is at least unusual, if not unprecedented."

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