

Hearing held in White Plains on French-American School's permit application

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WHITE PLAINS — The pros and cons of plans to build a \$60 million campus for 1,200 students at the former Ridgeway Country Club were debated tonight during a public hearing by the Common Council on the French-American School of New York's application for a special permit.

An overflow crowd jammed City Hall for the hearing, which was televised on closed-circuit TV in the first- and second-floor lobbies for those unable to find seats in the Common Council chamber. More than 80 people signed up to speak.

Mischa Zabotin, president of the FASNY Board of Trustees, described the proposal as "the best and most realistic use for the property."

In urging the council to approve the plan, Zabotin said: "This is a vibrant, multifaceted city that we would be proud to call home."

Terrence Guerriere, president of the Gedney Association, said: "This application is about a developer who wants to build an educational facility in the midst of a neighborhood of homes."

Noting that the school pays no property taxes, he told the council "you can say no."

In describing how many people from the Gedney Association have been working hard to stop the project, he said it was because they feel "it's essential to preserve our city's residential neighborhood."

FASNY bought the 129-acre property for \$11 million last year. It seeks to build facilities for students in nursery school through grade 12 and a staff of about 250 in seven buildings on 45 acres along Ridgeway to include athletic fields, a greenhouse and parking. The remaining 84 acres are to be set aside for the "Greens to Green Conservancy," a nature preserve that officials say would include trails and be open to the public for passive recreation at no cost to the city.

School officials say the plan would create more than 500 construction jobs and, once opened, pump more than \$14 million a year into the local economy. FASNY's plan has been endorsed by a host of environmental and business groups, and by almost 4,000 petition signers.

Opponents, who have put up signs against the plan throughout the Gedney neighborhood, counter that if approved, FASNY's proposal would lower the tax base, drain city services, overwhelm the neighborhood with traffic, exacerbate flooding, lower property values and siphon city services. They say the city has lost \$500,000 in property and sales taxes since FASNY bought the parcel.

Neighborhood resident Howard Hawkins described Ridgeway as a street of winding curves, hills and numerous blind spots.

"It's really not appropriate to handle the type of traffic that would be present if the school were built," he said.

Another resident, Patrick Lee, suggested that FASNY open the school in a building that already exists among what he described as the glut of available buildings, noting the amount of wetlands on the property.

"This project should not be on this bog, which is what they're trying to build it on," Lee said.

Wednesday's hearing was conducted as the city is considering a proposal to create new, restrictive open space zoning that would affect the FASNY property and five other parcels. The Open Space Recreational District would require 100- to 300-foot buffers and allow construction on just 5 percent of the land, and, if adopted, all but kill FASNY's application. The public hearing on the new zoning is scheduled to continue on Oct. 1.

The FASNY public hearing is to continue on Oct 17; written comments will be accepted through Oct. 29.