

## Community view: FASNY offers best use of Ridgeway property

Written by Mischa Zabolin

Oct 14

lohud.com

Almost two years ago, the French-American School purchased the defunct Ridgeway Country Club and proposed a plan to build a school and a nature conservancy on the property. Since then, my fellow FASNY parents and I have had literally hundreds of conversations about our plan with White Plains residents.

We have been struck by three things: White Plains residents are passionate about the need to create and protect open space; residents are proud of their community's reputation as a great place to raise a family and send children to school; and residents are committed to finding the best possible use for Ridgeway Country Club.

Frankly, it was these shared principles that led the French-American School to create our proposal.

Not all open space is created equal. Our plan transforms 84 acres — roughly two thirds of the property — into the Greens to Green Conservancy, a publicly accessible nature conservancy that will be created, maintained and secured by the French-American School at no cost to the city.

The land will remain undeveloped open space in perpetuity through the largest conservation easement in southern Westchester. The conservancy will feature miles of walking trails, bird blinds and diverse habitats. The Ridgeway Country Club was certainly attractive, but it was a private golf course, inaccessible to most White Plains residents.

Upon approval, this beautiful property will be open to all White Plains nature lovers. We are proud that our plan has received the support of many of Westchester's leading environmental organizations, including Westchester Land Trust, Stone Barns Center, and the Children's Environmental Literacy Foundation.

White Plains is rightly known as a city of educational excellence. From an educational perspective, we believe the French-American School brings a high quality, culturally diverse school that will complement the already outstanding public and private schools that White Plains boasts.

FASNY was founded by two teachers, one French, another American, in Larchmont in 1980. Since these humble beginnings with 17 students in two classrooms, FASNY has blossomed into a fantastic independent school. FASNY's educational mission is to provide an excellent bilingual multicultural education to children from diverse backgrounds. It teaches its students the importance of being active and responsible members of a broader community.

Our plan is to re-use the existing two-story clubhouse as our high school. Two architecturally similar two-story buildings will house our middle school and elementary school, and we will have a gym/auditorium, also two stories tall. The remaining 84 acres — two thirds of the property — will be the nature conservancy. This has always struck us as a reasonable and beneficial approach to the property.

Finally, we cannot look at the FASNY proposal in a vacuum, but instead need to evaluate it against potential alternatives and decide what is the best, most realistic use of the property. First, we need to recognize that the property will not be a golf course. Across Westchester and the nation, golf courses are failing. Ridgeway was on the market for two years with no buyer. There are 32 golf courses within a 10-mile radius of Ridgeway.

The city has been evaluating how to best preserve open space at Ridgeway and the other golf courses. They explored three alternatives. The first was a private recreation facility with extremely limited lot coverage restrictions that would have required a private commercial developer to purchase the entire 130-acre property but

only allow them to develop 6 acres. No developer would ever do this. Secondly, they looked at a school and found that a school would have little impact on the community, despite what some have said about our proposal. Finally, the city looked at creating a residential subdivision.

The property is currently zoned for single-family housing and, under the city's criteria, a developer could build upward of 60 McMansions. The remaining open space would be small, fragmented and minimally maintained. Many residents of Gedney Farms who today look out on a golf course — and under our proposal would look out on a beautiful nature conservancy — would face a row of five- and six-bedroom homes instead.

We understand that there are some concerns about our proposal, particularly as it relates to traffic on Ridgeway. We have developed a comprehensive traffic management system paid for by the school to minimize impacts during the one-hour drop-off and pick-up times. White Plains is a city of neighborhood schools. Schools are recognized as attractive amenities that help stabilize and strengthen the fabric of a neighborhood.

Home values are buttressed even in tougher economic times as families look to move near the German School, Ridgeway Elementary and Archbishop Stepinac, to name just a few. We believe that FASNY will do the same for the Gedney Farms neighborhood.

We believe that when our plan for a great school and a beautiful and publicly accessible nature conservancy is evaluated against the potential alternatives, our plan best embodies the policy goals of accessible open space, excellence in education and making the best use of properties like Ridgeway.

The writer is chairman,  
FASNY Board of Trustees.