

# Concerned Citizens for Open Space, Inc.



## FALL NEWSLETTER 2004

As we move from fall into winter, building continues in downtown White Plains with much more to come. Every inch of open space and virtually all trees and grasses in the downtown either have vanished or will soon. Citizens of White Plains are trying to cope with the advantages and disadvantages of the “come one, come all” policy for developers taking place without organized, comprehensive planning. On November 14 Mayor Delfino was quoted in the New York Times, Westchester Section, making the statement that says it all. The Mayor said, “The sky’s the limit on new development here.” His reference to “the sky” is particularly apt with two of Mr. Capelli’s towers nearing completion, three more already approved, and yet another tower proposed by a different builder. Although use of the sky does indeed seem unlimited, use of the city’s underground infrastructure is not. Forgotten or ignored by the administration is the evaluation made by the Planning Board to the effect that the city’s infrastructure could probably manage the first towers proposed by Mr. Cappelli, but not additional towers. ***Who will pay for future infrastructure upgrades?***

### CCOS Special Meeting

On September 20, CCOS sponsored a meeting attended by a standing-room only crowd of people from all parts of the city as well as members of the Common Council, the County Board of Legislators and our representatives from the State Assembly. The agenda for the meeting was an update by CCOS speakers covering three topics: parcels of city-owned open spaces ***in all parts of White Plains*** that are being offered for sale to developers, the future of property formerly occupied by St. Agnes Hospital and the Mayor’s publicized plan to permit massive commercialization on property owned by New York-Presbyterian Hospital in exchange for an unspecified arrangement that would temporarily give land for a city park. This arrangement even though commercialization on this residentially zoned property is specifically forbidden by the city’s zoning code.

### City-owned Open Space for Sale

The administration says it will sell a large number of city-owned, neighborhood open spaces to developers and use the money from the sales “to buy other open space”! Council President Tom Roach said there ***is no guarantee in this time of fiscal overruns that the money will be used to purchase open space.*** This confusion, combined with the fact that many of the parcels about other open space in need of expansion, such as land adjacent to the narrowest point of the unfinished Greenway, makes the sale of these properties unwise and exceedingly unfortunate. At no time has the administration reached out to seek input from the citizens of White Plains and, as a result, several important parcels of open space will be sold and developed in many neighborhoods. Information regarding which parcels of land are still for sale is available to citizens concerned about the impact on their neighborhood. Contact Susan Habel, Commissioner of Planning, 422-1366 or Alan Teck, President of CCOS, daytime 949-6422.

### St. Agnes Property

St. Agnes property is zoned solely as residential property. The hospital operated under a special permit for hospital use. Unfortunately, the hospital accumulated a massive debt of \$36 million and was forced to close. The property has been placed under the jurisdiction of the New York State Dormitory Authority and, as of this writing, the Dormitory Authority is planning to hold an auction and sell the property to the highest bidder in December. However, the issue of zoning has still to be resolved. Our representatives in the State Assembly hope to pass legislation that will protect the

right of the city to preserve municipal zoning control. If that is successful it will be up to the city administration to protect the land from unwanted commercial development in a residential area.

## **New York-Presbyterian Hospital (NYPH)**

Two years ago NYPH received permission to build a Proton Beam Accelerator for cancer treatment, a 384,000 sq. ft. building (larger than Bloomingdales), to house laboratories for presumed medical bio-medical research and a five-story 900 car garage. After two years, no work has begun on this project. This is not surprising in view of the enormous cost to build an accelerator and the fact that the cash-strapped hospital does not appear interested in providing “not-for-profit” research medical research. Unfortunately, permission to renew this ill-conceived project for a third year was passed at the November 2004 Common Council meeting, with only Tom Roach and Rita Malmud voting to end permission. CCOS would like to see medical research laboratories developed on one of the many available spaces available throughout Westchester that would not permanently destroy many acres of woods, meadows and wetlands and add still more traffic and pollution in the heart of our city.

In January 2004 Mayor Delfino announced he has personally negotiated a “hand shake” agreement with NYPH to rezone a large part of the NYPH property for *medical commercial* development in exchange for the *lease* of 55 acres of land for a public park. Caveats abound because: this agreement was made secretly, without the knowledge of members of the Common Council; “medical” commercial is not a defined, legally-enforceable term and therefore is no different than “commercial” activity of any sort. These secret negotiations leave an opening for any commercial entity to be built on the property; and only about 20 of the 55 acres offered for a park are usable because the rest is on steep slopes and wetlands that cannot be used by either the hospital or city. Thus far no action has been taken on this proposal because the hospital has never acknowledged the agreement, nor has it brought a proposal to the Common Council for approval. White Plains deserves more than to *temporarily* lease 20 useable acres that will always belong to the hospital in exchange for commercial development that will yield hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue for NYPH that pays no taxes.

## **And finally**

CCOS is a tax-exempt, non-political, advocacy organization determined to fight to preserve as much as possible of the rapidly dwindling open space in our city and to monitor the ever growing over-development in downtown White Plains as traffic jams have already become the norm and pollution fills the air. The administration continues to ignore the fact that arbitrary development does not automatically bring wealth to a community. *That is why the city raised our taxes by 12.7% this year and increased the cost of parking.* CCOS will continue the fight for an appropriately sized central park on the Frederick Law Olmsted designed property of NYPH, to use newly city-acquired property such as the currently unusable D’Elia property that joins the Ridgeway nature trail and the completed part of the Greenway and to finish the all-but-abandoned completion of the Greenway. As always your continued support and financial help is needed and very much appreciated. Please use the enclosed envelope during this holiday season to send CCOS your tax-exempt contribution. Thank you.

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Barbara Benjamin, Chairperson, CCOS

CCOS is a project of the Open Space Institute, a tax-exempt public charity under Sec.501(3) of the IRS code

**A non-profit, tax-exempt organization advocating preservation, enhancement and expansion of open space and parkland in  
White Plains and Westchester County**

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