

March 11, 2022

Town Administrator  
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Letter of Ideas and Concern for the Former Westport High School

For the past two years, I have been following with interest the discussions regarding reuse projects for the former Westport High School (WHS) and would like to submit some ideas for consideration by those appointed to review and make suggestions for the property.

Thinking ahead with foresight and needs for our community as we grow, I strongly urge the Town to keep the former high school. Its location in the center of the Town, close to the schools and library, makes it easily accessible from all parts of our community. As such, it would be an ideal location for all the Town's administrative offices, including the School Department that is currently there. Having all the departments in one location alleviates the current back and forth driving from Town Hall to the Annex to the different departments for obtaining permits or information regarding required procedures for doing business in Town. The former high school is already wired for internet, has ample parking and ADA accessibility, and an auditorium that is large enough for Town Meetings.

I know first-hand that the Council on Aging is stretched for space in all program areas. Moving to the high school would provide ample room for the extended day program, and all of the health/exercise classes that are now limited due to space and have waiting lists for potential participants. The certified kitchen at the former high school could offer more meals for the elderly community. The gym would be perfect for many of the programs sponsored by the Recreation Department.

The auditorium could still be used for Town Meeting as it offers more space than the new Middle High School auditorium. It could also be used for lectures and related activities for educating and training staff, town departments, community organizations and much more. It would also be perfect for the summer film and concert series hosted by the Recreation Department.

I have heard some say that the old school should be turned into housing. The water infrastructure to support that use would be burdensome to the site considering the size of a wastewater system needed to handle daily inputs; and the drawdown on the aquifer would be significant compared to weekly business use.

How to pay for this? With current increased demand for real estate, the Town Hall, the Annex, the Council on Aging are very marketable for mixed use in Central Village and single family housing at the Head of Westport. With the interest in repurposing buildings, large grants, both private, state and federal, are available and could provide funding opportunities. Our State Senator and House Representative might be instrumental in directing this effort.

Extra space could be rented to outside organizations such as The Second Half who provides continued learning opportunities for seniors. They are looking for a permanent "home". The building would also be the perfect new location for the Westport Food Pantry. The current location at the Grange is good, but lacks ADA accessibility and parking for the future when the pantry hopes to open for in-person shopping.

In 1982 the Town turned down the opportunity to purchase 28 acres of coastal beach that abuts the Cherry and Webb Conservation area. Imagine our beach today if the Town Meeting had had the insight to buy it?

Let's not let that happen again. We have a unique opportunity to do something beneficial for our community. Let's envision our future.

Sincerely,

Gay Gillespie  
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