

Is now the time to plan a speculative \$4 million project?

By Councilwoman Susan Siegel

On March 24th, at an untelevised meeting, the Town Board voted 3-2, with Councilman Patel and I voting no, to proceed with Supervisor Grace's plan to relocate the highway and parks department garages to new buildings off Greenwood Street, demolish the existing highway garage, and sell the vacant site to a private developer who would erect a 3-story mixed use office/retail/residential building on the site.

The cost of the project, estimated at \$4 million, comes with a net cost of \$2.5 million: \$4 million to construct just the highway garage plus site development costs, minus \$1.5 million from the anticipated sale of the vacated highway garage site.

According to the supervisor's plan, in addition to designing the highway garage, town staff will also design the new commercial building, get all the approvals from the NYS DEC and NYC DEP, and then sell the approved plan and vacant site to a private developer.

I'm not against the concept of relocating the highway garage. I agree with Supervisor Grace that the concept has several potential long term benefits. But — I voted against proceeding with the project because I don't believe now is the time to embark on a speculative \$4 million project. These are my reasons.

Priorities

Look around you. Our roads, bridges and culverts are crumbling. Within the past nine months, we've had to undertake two major road/culvert repairs on an emergency basis because no planning had been done for either location, even though both problems were well known. The board recently approved borrowing \$1.45 million for road and culvert projects — but there are no plans for how a good portion of that money will be spent.

Too many of our neighborhoods are prone to flooding because our drainage systems are antiquated, undersized and poorly maintained — but no planning has been done to address these problems.

It's been over three years and we still haven't fixed the roof leak over the Town Board meeting room or hooked up the emergency generator at the YCCC.

And, at the same time the list of critical "waiting in the wings" projects continues to grow, our highway superintendent has stated publicly that the existing garage is adequate and serviceable.

Like homeowners and businesses, we need to set priorities: What projects need to be done now and what projects would be "nice to have" but can wait.

Cost

The numbers are constantly changing. The size of the building is constantly changing. The supervisor is even talking about buying second hand steel buildings "in order to save money."

What was originally sold to the community as a wash — the sale of the highway garage site would pay for the relocation and construction of a new garage — could now cost taxpayers \$2.5 million.

But even the latest cost estimates are questionable. The construction costs are based only on square footage calculations. There's no documentation explaining why a 40,000 square foot highway garage building is needed. The Highway Department was never consulted about its space needs.

And without detailed site development plans and input from the DEC and DEP about what site improvements they will require in order to protect both environmentally sensitive sites, there's no way to reasonably estimate what those costs will be.

And there are no cost estimates for demolishing the existing highway garage or to build the Parks Department garage.

And under the "what will it cost" category, there's the question of whether town staff will be able to prepare the detailed site plans that will be required by the approval agencies. Last year, the town spent \$16,500 for an outside engineering firm to design the drainage upgrade of the Route 202 ball fields, clearly a much smaller and much simpler project.

And should town staff, paid for with taxpayer dollars, be doing the design and site plan work for what will be a privately owned commercial building? Site plans for privately owned buildings are typically the responsibility of developers.

Wishful thinking

Efficiency: We're being told that the relocation of the highway garage will generate efficiencies that will save money. But we haven't been given any numbers. In 2013, we were told a change in operations would save over \$100,000. Most of that savings never materialized.

If the Town Board wants to increase efficiency and save money, moving forward with the water meter replacement program, taxpayers will save over \$150,000 a year. A real savings.

Revitalizing downtown: We're being told that the new commercial building will be the cornerstone of revitalizing the Heights hamlet and that this single building will become the "heart" of downtown Yorktown and will make the Heights a destination for visitors.

Look at the map. The highway garage site is on the outer fringe the downtown Heights area. It's the gateway to the town's industrial zone. It's across the street from an auto body shop, down the street from parked garbage trucks and in the path of school buses and UPS trucks that operate 24/7. Not exactly the location for a vibrant new downtown.

And some final questions

The supervisor says there's strong public support for the project. Where's the evidence of that? Why was the vote to proceed with his plan taken at a non-televised board meeting?

How do we know there'll be a developer who will want to build the commercial building the town has designed? Or, will town staff be designing a building with a future developer already in mind?

Given the current uncertain economic climate, the existing number of vacancies in Yorktown and surrounding communities, the need to address our decaying infrastructure, and the constant pressure to stay within the tax cap, is now really the time for the town to use its limited resources to plan a speculative \$4 million project?