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Brown: Wayside plan won't benefit children

By Eugenia Brown / Guest Columnist

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Wayside Youth and Family Support Network proposes to build a campus-style headquarters.

The planned facility contains administrative headquarters, dormitory for 72 adolescents with space for service and education, along with an indoor gym and athletic field. The site is so limited that there is no space for a free casual outdoor activities, so there will be no "campus style" living conditions for its prime customers -- the disadvantaged kids.

Three articles previously published in The MetroWest Daily News by leaders of Sucker Pond Neighborhood Association have raised fundamental environmental issues. The neighborhood's infrastructure has been already overwhelmed and the Sucker Pond surrounded by the town conservation land has been polluted. Bob Durand is planning to deal "specifically with environmental issues on the site" according to his statement to Peter Reuell ("Wayside site cleanup," 8/14/03). The effort by the environmental expert would be a bonus for everyone, but Durand's plan to "produce a report based on neighbor's comments how to clean the property" is alarming (the statement was repeated in the article last Sunday). The plan should be driven by professional standards and methods to reverse pollution, not by public opinion.

There is a question about the cost vs. benefit analysis of this project: the benefit for children in need and the cost that the town would have to pay.

Eric Masi and Donald S. Keller described their mission (Views section, 7/28/03) as help for disadvantaged "children to live full, productive, happy lives." The Wayside youth should receive treatment that cures their troubles at home and school. General consensus among mental-health practitioners is that children show the greatest promise of improvement when they are living in small residential settings with a warm home-like atmosphere. Kids should have usual everyday responsibilities of their household under trained staff supervision. This kind of environment would train them how to live a normal responsible life in the future.

What kind of facility is planned on the Sucker Pond site? According to the Site Plan presented by Wayside, the children's housing configuration resembles the living arrangement in a correctional facility (several architects, who have viewed the plans, have offered that view). On the floor there will be long corridors with rooms on each side; staff personnel space will be located at the center of the floor, where 3 or 4 corridors meet. All together, there will be 72 kids in the dormitory building. Almost all mental-health professionals agree that the most successful and manageable group home should not house more than eight to 10 children. The number of 72 significantly disturbed adolescents is just too large to be safe for the kids and for the staff. And what way of life would they be trained for in this environment?

No one yet knows the detailed program of the new facility. Wayside claims a Dover Amendment status as an educational entity. There is an extreme deficit of square footage on the site plan for a developed educational function, if the building is two stories as claimed. Does the Wayside complex qualify to be covered by the Dover Amendment? The proposed facility is a large institutional setting that includes corporate headquarters with over 100 employees/counselors and undefined number of visitors, which creates traffic and overlarge parking lot hardly feasible for the site.

This brings us to the next question. What are the criteria for granting Dover Amendment status? Can Dover Amendment status be claimed by anyone who proposes the most minimal educational function? This would mean that the development is not under review by the Planning Board. Wouldn't you worry if the facility owners at the end of your street can build as they please, and the usual building review would not protect your neighborhood's infrastructure from a critical overload?

If the facility proposed by Wayside is not likely to offer the best therapeutic and educational benefit to the children, on what basis could it be qualified as a Dover Amendment project? Why should this facility be built in the neighborhood? The question is much larger than the Sucker Pond Neighborhood. The town of Framingham is in a financial crisis for

several well-known reasons. The Wayside development, if qualified as an educational facility under the Dover Amendment, would be tax-exempt. That means that the town of Framingham would have to cover additional spending for road repair, traffic control, infrastructure repair and its capacity development, for fire and police services as well as for schools that would be used by Wayside.

"Who needs this new facility on the limited site squeezed inside the residential zone and what for?"

Will children be rehabilitated as they would be in a small home environment (traditional approach), or will they be one more time abused and neglected by the decision to put them in unhealthy prison-like dorms and to use the limited site for headquarters' office building?

Eugenia Brown is with the Association AIA.