

The METROWEST DAILY NEWS

Spitz: Which side wears the white hats?

By Julia Spitz

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Maybe you can find the villain here. All I see are people standing up for what they believe.

"This is no black-and-white issue. It's not good vs. evil," said Steve Whitkin, who is leading an appeal of Framingham's issuance of a building permit to Wayside Youth and Family Support Network for a residential campus for 72 teens in his neighborhood.

"I understand the concerns neighbors have," said Eric Masi, Wayside's president and CEO. "I understand it feels to neighbors and town officials they don't have the sense of control over this they do over other projects. At the end of the day, all I ask is they give our kids a chance.

"Our programs serve over 1,000 Framingham residents a year, so we're not interlopers here."

Actually, the nonprofit agency that serves teens and their families throughout the region was born in Framingham in 1977.

It was a difficult birth.

When area activists came up with the idea of Harbinger House, one of New England's first residences specifically designed for homeless teens, residents thought Arlington Street, just south of downtown, was a poor fit and town officials denied the occupancy permits.

"When I started, Harbinger House was in court against the town of Framingham for failing to give them permits," said Masi, who last week marked his 26th year with Wayside. His first mission was to talk to the neighbors.

"I went next door to meet the people who were most opposed. I was about to tell them why they were wrong." Then he noticed the couple reminded him of his own Italian grandparents, and "I realized my grandparents would have a lot of concerns" about kids with a history of acting out or running away.

"I can understand people's concerns. All I can say is give us a chance."

The couple did, and "four years later, their grandson was in our program," said Masi.

Wayside, which Harbinger House Inc. was renamed in 1984, now offers a range of social support programs for young people at sites in Framingham, Marlborough, Milford, Waltham and other communities.

It's the residential homes that draw the most opposition.

On April 19, the Framingham Zoning Board of Appeals will hear opposition filed by Whitkin and signed by about 160 residents who live near the campus proposed for the site behind Lockland Avenue.

The appeal aims to pull the plug on Wayside's building permit issued Jan. 28. The appeal claims Wayside's facility, which will include townhouse dormitories, school space, administrative offices, a gym and playing field, violates height and frontage bylaws. Other issues in the appeal include a public access permit and whether the project should be protected by the Dover Amendment, a state law that allows educational projects to skirt local zoning requirements.

Wayside has proposed building a three-story facility for 72 boys and girls to replace its group homes in the area, including the Esperanza House on [Indian](#) Head Road, which is part of the Lockland Avenue neighborhood.

"If this is built, it will be a 24/7 operation. This is a commercial project, not a residential project," Whitkin said Thursday. "It's like a size 10 foot trying to get into a size 5 shoe."

"I'm really supportive of so many of these projects," said Selectman Katie Murphy. "Wayside does a great deal of good work. I think they can definitely be credited with saving lives.

"I just think this is the wrong project in the wrong place," she said.

Several hundred homes, many of them smaller Capes, are tucked into the Lockland Avenue neighborhood between Indian Head, off Central Street, and Rte. 9 westbound near Whole Foods.

"I just feel like it's out of place for the neighborhood," Steven O'Connor, who lives on nearby Sunset Drive, said of the Wayside project. "I have small children. I'm concerned with it bringing down the value of the neighborhood, making it less safe for my children."

Faced with the idea of Wayside staff's cars on their roads, delivery trucks in and out of the site, and a school in their neighborhood, many people living in the Sucker Pond area have similar feelings.

So did residents around Sudbury Street in Marlborough in 1999.

"The opposition we've faced has been an equal economic opportunity," said Masi.

Homeowners in the upscale area near the Sudbury town line were up in arms when Wayside bought the home at 512 Sudbury St. and announced plans to house nine teen boys there.

They worried about safety. They worried about their way of life. They worried about traffic.

"Traffic is not the big issue. I'll tell you that right now," said one woman who opposed the Wayside project in Marlborough. "The real issue is, 'Oh, my God, who are these kids?'"

"They don't need to be scared," said Dana Zais, licensed social worker, who runs the Wayside Day Center program and oversees psychiatric care in all the Wayside programs. "These aren't kids who are breaking into houses. These are kids who need extra help. I live in a neighborhood. I have a family. I understand. These aren't criminal kids. They need direction. They get a lot of support."

They're also not necessarily strangers. They could well be sons and daughters of people you know, Masi said.

"These kids are already in their neighborhoods. They may have special needs. They may have more persistent emotional problems they have to deal with. No one is referred to us because they're a criminal."

Another opponent, who also asked that her name not be used, said the group home has prompted residents to sell their houses.

Eight houses on Sudbury Street were sold in 1999, prior to the group home's opening in 2000. Five homes on the street changed hands in 2004. The years in between averaged seven sales a year. Maybe the mass exodus is on surrounding streets.

In 1999, the sold houses ranged from \$200,000 to \$497,000. Homes sold last year from \$370,000 to \$670,000.

"In 26 years, we've never had the experience of negatively affecting property values," said Masi.

The Sudbury Street group home would be put on the market when the Framingham campus is built, he said.

A long campaign

"The only way we can convince neighbors that we're a good neighbor is with time," said Masi.

The people near the proposed Wayside campus have had several years to think about the possibility.

In June 2001, the Framingham Planning Board approved an 18-home subdivision known as Crystal Springs between Donna Road and Lockland Avenue. That, too, faced opposition. Landowner Joseph Piazza initially wanted 31 homes, but the number was lowered due to zoning and traffic concerns. Plans for the 18-home subdivision were rescinded when developers failed to make substantial changes to the property in time, and, in January 2002, Wayside looked to buy the property.

That month, the Sucker Pond Neighborhood Association was formed.

More than 100 residents attended the meeting at which Whitkin, a lawyer, spoke about town zoning bylaws and the Dover Amendment, and others warned of traffic, safety, sewage and environmental problems that would come with the Wayside plan.

There have been ups and downs for both sides between then and the day the building permit was issued for 1 Frederick Abbott Way, the site behind Lockland Avenue, a little more than a month ago. But the tone has been civil.

"Much as the older couple next to the first Harbinger House, they have legitimate concerns," said Masi. "The only way we can convince people is by our track records."

"I don't expect this group of opponents to welcome us, but most of them have kept an open mind and I appreciate that. In meetings, they've shown concern for our kids."

Residents have said small group homes are better for dealing with troubled teens than a large campus. Masi says the campus would be ideal.

"Teens go to school with hundreds of students where they have access to a number of teachers and resources," said Masi. "If you think of private schools the wealthy send their kids to, this is a similar model."

"The smaller group home model is designed for adults and the mentally handicapped who are transitioning back into society," he said. But, "since there are benefits to small communities, they'll live in groups of 12 in townhouses."

The new facility would benefit kids by having more services on-site, said Masi. "Right now, our clinicians have to be general practitioners" to deal with issues ranging from eating disorders to attention deficit to thoughts of suicide at each of the agency's 13 sites. Some adolescents in residential programs now go to the Wayside Day Center in Framingham to focus on psychological healing. Others go to Wayside Academy in Marlborough, designed for students with special education needs.

"Whether it's a clinician who specializes in eating disorders or a teacher who's a really good math teacher," the child will have access at the new site.

"I've never heard any opponent say anything bad about our agency or what we do. It's the unknown" that's scary, he said.

Beyond the unknown

Opponents of the Framingham campus have also voiced concerns about land contamination.

"The previous owner used to let highway departments and construction companies dump there. It's low-grade contamination," said Masi. "We will test continually during construction" and tests will continue "for 10 years, I think." He said experts expect to find hot spots of creosote from railroad ties and asbestos from roof shingles.

"We're held to a higher standard than a developer because of our financing," said Masi. "If a developer uses his own money, he doesn't need to do 21E (environmental testing). The bank requires it" of Wayside.

Masi has also heard charges this will be primarily an administrative building, not a school.

"Administration is 8,000 square feet of the 60,000 square feet," he said. "This is mostly for kids." And, he said, "there are possibly some benefits for the neighborhood," such as the potential to use the sports field.

"We have the same relationship with our neighbors as most people do," he said. "Some people on Dennison Avenue (where one of the two Harbinger Houses is now located) have brought pies on Thanksgiving. In other cases, we just peacefully coexist."

"These youngsters have every right to live in a nice neighborhood," said Masi.

"They deserve to have good things happen to them," said Zais, the social worker. "They've gone through so many struggles to get to where they are. We all deserve good things to happen to us."

"If we were opening a place for medical treatments, like cancer or diabetes, would people still have the same objections?" Zais asked.

Look at the house next to yours and think long and hard before you answer. Then decide if there might be a villain lurking in your mirror.