

Remarks of Mayor Noam Bramson
Shiloh Housing Proposal
June 17, 2008

My remarks are rather lengthy, but I believe that those with an interest in this subject deserve a full explanation of my views.

We are rarely presented with perfect developments. Almost all require a balancing of pros and cons, of costs and benefits. And certainly the proposal before us tonight has stimulated lively debate.

I understand and respect – and in some case agree with – several of the objections that have been raised, but I believe that the arguments in favor of proceeding are more numerous and powerful.

First and foremost is the urgent need for the type of housing proposed.

Affordable senior housing is in great demand, with waiting lists for our current housing stock running into the hundreds. The provision of affordable senior housing is widely regarded as a cornerstone of efforts to create livable communities in which all residents of every income level have an opportunity to age in place, close to friends and family. The Shiloh proposal will help us attain this goal.

Second, it is a statistical fact that senior housing generates less traffic, requires fewer parking spaces, and utilizes fewer services than traditional housing. I believe, therefore, that the direct impact of this development on its surroundings will be very modest, indeed, by most measures, almost imperceptible.

Third, the block on which Shiloh is sited can be most accurately described as mixed in style and character. While there are some single or two-family homes, there are also already mid-rise multi-family dwellings similar in height and scale to the proposed project. The argument that this development represents a significant change in the appearance or density of the block is, in my opinion, an exaggeration. And because the building is set back from Webster Avenue, from all but the most immediate vantage points, it will be literally invisible.

Let me now shift to a discussion of land use and zoning. Several thoughtful critics of this development have argued that it contradicts and undermines the City's often-stated land use strategy, which encourages growth in our primary commercial areas, while limiting growth in our neighborhoods.

This argument has validity, but, in this particular instance, lacks historical context.

The City's policy is, indeed, as described, and I strongly support it. I am proud of the various steps taken by the Council in recent months consistent with this vision. We have down-zoned hundreds, if not thousands, of parcels, covering a substantial percentage of the City's land area. We have increased minimum lot sizes in dozens of our neighborhoods. We have applied a recreation and open space zone to some 800 acres. We have expanded and invested in our parks.

But it must be noted that this housing proposal pre-dates by several years the articulation and implementation of these policies.

The project's proponents – who are not developers with a primary interest in profit-making, but rather a well-established community group, composed mostly of New Rochelle residents – invested considerable time, energy, and financial resources in proceeding to this point, often with the encouragement of City planners, and they did so prior to the adoption of recent changes in the zoning code. Indeed, at the time that the zoning map was amended for the Webster Avenue corridor, it was explicitly noted by our staff that the zoning action should not be viewed as a judgment on Shiloh's proposal, which was being considered on a separate track.

The long-standing investment of a well-regarded community group is, as a matter of simple fairness, deserving of respect and consideration.

At the same time, let me be clear that approval of this development, or of another proposed project at Lincoln and Brook, if it is forthcoming, should not be seen as setting a precedent. These are, in a sense, the last of the projects already in the pipeline. Were they being introduced for the first time today, my own personal reaction to them might well be very different.

Any future developments will have to undergo their own test of pros and cons, and it would be foolhardy to make firm prejudgments, but, at least for me, for proposals of this nature that post-date our new zoning and land-use efforts, the burden of proof will be considerably higher.

Lastly, I would like to make a general point about planning. Sound planning is undeniably critical to healthy communities. And New Rochelle does, in fact, have a Comprehensive Plan, recognized by the Westchester Municipal Officials Association for its quality. All substantial projects are carefully assessed for consistency with this plan. And, frankly, the various zoning and land use actions I mentioned a moment ago, constitute, in their aggregate, a robust plan for smart growth.

But we should acknowledge forthrightly that, to be meaningful, plans must proceed in concert with private investment and action, and respect economic

constraints and uncertainties. It is fine to say, in the abstract, we want affordable housing on such a street or such a block, but if there is no one willing and capable of building it, then such a statement is an empty pledge and little more.

The best plans establish clear principles and form a context for the developments initiated by government, while being flexible enough to account for shifting circumstances, and for the sometimes-competing values and goals of our community.

Every City makes mistakes, but I believe that our planning in New Rochelle has struck a good balance, and is helping to produce, year by year, a better community, of which all of our diverse residents can be increasingly proud.

With thanks for the patience of those listening, and with respect for those who disagree with my conclusion, I vote yes.