

County legislative hearing produces surprising news in WJWW plant fight

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Former WCBS-TV (Channel 2) regional correspondent Lou Young, a familiar voice and face for decades in the Greater Metropolitan region, appeared at the Westchester Joint Water Works hearing on Feb. 15 in his new role as a spokesperson for the Village of Mamaroneck Board of Trustees, of which he is a member. Young enthusiastically endorsed the planned plant location and denounced its NIMBY critics. (Courtesy photo of Westchester County video feed)

By DICK HUBERT | Comments: 0 | [Leave a comment](#)

Columnist

On the County Legislature's schedule, it looked like a routine hearing.

The public was invited on Thursday, Feb. 15 to either show up in person or via pre registration on an Internet connection to give their opinions, confined to three minutes, to the proposed land swap that would enable the Westchester Joint Water Works to build their long-delayed, court-mandated water filtration plant at an industrial land-zoned location on Purchase Street on Westchester County Airport property instead of the currently WJWW owned parcel of equal size in a residential zone also on airport land.

It is the Legislature that must approve or deny the land swap, with County Executive George Latimer presumably endorsing whatever decision is made.

Passionate but well known opinions from both sides were heard until, at one hour and five minutes into the proceedings, attorney B. David Naidu of the New York office of the nationally known law firm K&L Gates came to the podium on behalf of his client, Virgil Price of 6 Wolfe Lane in Purchase.

Baidu announced that Price was the new owner (as of December 2023) of the land previously owned by Purchase billionaire Michael Tokarz (who for years bitterly fought the WJWW's efforts to build on the County Airport land adjoining his property and later switched sides and joined the opposition to the land swap) and that Price was in favor of the land swap.

Naidu said that Price, who has lived at his 11-acre home for over 70 years, intends to pass it on to his children. Further, when Tokarz offered for sale the adjoining 37 acres of land, Price purchased it via a wholly owned limited liability corporation to insure "peace and quiet" for generations to come.

Link to entire land swap hearing

To see the entire Board of Legislators hearing on the land swap to make way for construction of a Westchester Joint Water Works filtration plant, go to:

https://westchestercountyny.granicus.com/player/clip/6721?view_id=1&redirect=true

Naidu also made clear that his firm would fight any effort to force the WJWW to build on the land adjacent to what Price now owns.

Since everyone who came after Naidu had a previously prepared speech, no one picked up on the full implications of the change in ownership of the former Sylvan Development Corporation land which saw Tokarz replaced by Price and opposition to the land swap traded for support.

No one who spoke before Naidu seemed aware of the momentous announcement to come either.

Town of Mamaroneck Supervisor Jane Elkind Eney, also chair of the WJWW Board, gave full throated support for the plant's proposed construction site.

George Klein spoke against the land swap on behalf of the Sierra Club and recounted environmental reasons for why it should not be built at the Purchase Street location.

Peter Close of the Quaker Friends Meeting House in Purchase, which owns the adjoining property to the proposed land swap site, passionately recounted all the Friends' arguments to "Stop the Swap"—environmental, historical, and next to a house of worship.

Anne Gold, the former executive director and now a board member of the Purchase Environmental Protective Association (PEPA), gave a brief speech endorsing opposition to the land swap but not giving a hint of the decision of PEPA board member Michael Tokarz to sell his land surrounding the location preferred by Gold, PEPA, the Friends, the Sierra Club, and all other land swap opponents.

Gold spoke right before Naidu took the podium.

One who could have mentioned the Naidu statement, and did not, was the longtime and now retired WCBS-TV regional correspondent, Lou Young, currently a trustee of the Village of Mamaroneck.

As one the final speakers, Young denounced the land swap opposition for tying up construction of the filtration plant for 20 years.

He spoke of the 2,000 square miles of upstate watershed delivering clean water—a gift from previous generations.

He declared it could not be done today because of NIMBY style opponents.

"Now," he said, "all we have to do is filter the water. But the last minute opposition always surfaces, 'not in my backyard.'...Do we address the essential need of 100,000 Westchester residents for clean water, or do we cave in to the interests of a few neighbors who appear to be, and I say this with all charity, over exaggerating the potential impact of this essential plant and the complaints that amount to "not in my backyard?"

Young continued: "There's always opposition to progress. The hardworking people of Mamaroneck, my constituents, should not be subject to crippling fines for non compliance to appease some well-heeled residents and their speculative inconvenience. I urge you to keep your eye on the ball. Future generations, like the people who built that water system, will remember what you do."

A young woman engineer denouncing the land swap followed, with an online wrap-up from a resident of Purchase Estates endorsing the land swap which he said would protect the flora and fauna in his neighborhood.

The reaction after the meeting

It took time for the Naidu/Price message to sink in.

The Westmore News sent e-mails and made telephone calls to both the WJWW and the Friends asking for comment on the Naidu/Price statement.

Prefacing a lengthy document recounting all of the technical, historical, and environmental reasons for opposing the land swap, Friends Meeting House spokesperson Austa Devlin wrote:

"It's a shame to think that the board of legislators of Westchester County might be swayed by the voice of one wealthy landowner—who lives in Florida—who threatens to use his wealth to oppose the environmental safety concerns of Westchester residents for his own NIMBY interests. We think our county legislators have more backbone than that!"

Devlin did not respond to requests for comment on the Friends being abandoned by Tokarz and his Sylvan Development Corporation, who at first opposed construction of the plant on the site currently owned by the WJWW and more recently changed positions and offered to withdraw their opposition and welcomed the plant at that location—joining in the chorus to oppose the land swap.

She e-mailed: "The concerned members of Purchase Friends Meeting have no relationship with Mr. Tokarz."

For her part, WJWW Board chair and spokesperson Jane Elkind Eney e-mailed:

"Attorney David Naidu's comments at the Board of Legislators Listening Session with respect to his client's fervent opposition to locating the WJWW Filtration Plant at the property currently owned by WJWW only emphasizes the importance of the land swap. His client, Virgil Price, lives on Wolfe Lane which is adjacent to the parcel WJWW currently owns. Mr. Price, by way of his attorney Mr. Naidu, has a clear understanding of the facts surrounding the land swap. He supports the Filtration Plant being sited on the County Airport Parcel and opposes the Plant being constructed on the parcel currently owned by WJWW. He accurately laid out a case why the County Airport Parcel is the superior site—from a zoning perspective, environmental perspective, and proximity to existing infrastructure perspective. As stated, Mr. Price is committed to ensuring that his property, and that of his neighbors, retain their residential character as zoned by the Town/Village of Harrison for residential use only. The County Airport Parcel, zoned as a "Special Business" district (SB-0), provides for this type of commercial use."

So now it's up to the Board of Legislators to come to grips with a decision that most politicians are unwilling to make: which group do they want to infuriate by their vote?

It's a decision that must be made as quickly as possible as federal and state court fines for not even starting construction of the plant mount.



Attorney B. David Naidu of the New York office of the law firm K&L Gates spoke at the hearing on behalf of Purchase landowner Virgil Price who bought 37 acres adjoining his home from Michael Tokarz and his Sylvan Development Corp. and promised to fight any effort to stop WJWW from building on its planned new Purchase Street site. Photo from K&L Gates website