
**Comments On
RPC Core Development RFQ Submissions**

Submitted to the Orangetown Town Board

September 27, 2004

By the



Introduction

The Orangetown Town Board's choice to acquire the Rockland Psychiatric Center property can be considered one of best things to happen to Orangetown in several decades. The Pearl River Chamber of Commerce is pleased with the approved development thus far and is eagerly awaiting the day when the site is fully developed with mixed uses for the enjoyment of all town residents for generations to come.

The voters in Orangetown ratified the purchase the property based on the premise that the core portion of the site would be developed as a solid tax ratable to offset the taxpayer-borne acquisition costs. To that end, the town initiated the Request for Qualifications process to identify the most suitable re-development plans as well to select a firm capable bringing them to fruition.

The Pearl River Chamber of Commerce, a vibrant and active organization of local businesses and residents dedicated to improving the vitality of our hamlet and the town as a whole, has been monitoring these efforts closely. Specifically, we have carefully reviewed all of the RFQ submissions for development of the core site. We do not believe it is appropriate or necessary for our organization to weigh in to the Town Board on any particular developer or development as a whole. Rather, this document is submitted to convey our position on specific elements appearing in the RFQ submissions. We believe that our comments should be incorporated into the Town's decision-making as it proceeds to the next phase of addressing the future of RPC.

Elements Endorsed by the Pearl River Chamber of Commerce

There are many positive elements to the majority of the proposals. We firmly believe the following concepts are among those in the submissions that represent appropriate use of the RPC space. In well-planned combination they will enhance the tax base with clean ratables while maintaining the quality and character of the town:

- research laboratories
- multi-phase senior living
- hotel space
- volunteer housing
- recreational facilities
- open space preservation
- shuttlebus service to the close-by commercial centers

Other items from the submissions that intrigued us included the artist loft space concept and an open-air amphitheater. The prospect of bolstering the Orangetown arts community is quite desirable and we definitely hold that aspects of these efforts could also be addressed in the current hamlet and village centers.

Finally, several developers mentioned keeping the integrity of the old architecture on the RPC site. We feel that is a component that should be strongly encouraged and hope that such preservation-minded direction spreads beyond the RPC site to some of our other classic but sadly neglected structures.

Elements Objected to by the Pearl River Chamber of Commerce

Our key objections are focused on three elements that appeared in various submissions: 1) retail space, 2) single-family, non-age-specific dwellings, and 3) condominium-style offices.

1) Retail Space

As members of our organization voiced to you in August, the Chamber of Commerce is *vehemently opposed to any and all retail development at RPC*. Since seven of the nine proposals offer retail, we will briefly discuss our points of opposition with you.

- **There is more than enough retail a stone's throw from RPC.** To approve more retail despite these facts is in effect to damage established tax-paying businesses. Additional retail will certainly stress, if not force the closure of, some of the many vibrant enterprises currently in the area. Any increase in retail ratables from new development—especially in an environment that is already saturated -- will almost certainly be offset by a decline in tax revenues from the existing retail stock. The following chart clearly demonstrates that even a large influx of new residents will be amply served by the existing “convenience” retail base:

Convenience Retailers Proximate to RPC Site			
Business Type	Within 1 Mile	Within 2 Miles	Within 3 Miles
Auto service/Gasoline		2	10
Dry Cleaner/Laundry		9	9
Grocery/Deli/Minimarket	2	11	16
Liquor/Wine Shop	1	2	4
Pharmacy		2	4
Restaurant	6	28	76
Salon/Barbershop	1	11	29
Specialty Food	1	7	13

Source: USADATA

Further, one does not have to wander far from the site to observe plenty of vacant retail space perfect for meeting any additional shopping needs. The retail infrastructure is there. It need not be augmented.

Elements Objected to by the Pearl River Chamber of Commerce(cont'd)

1) Retail Space(cont'd)

- One of the most compelling reasons for Orangetown to establish strict limits on retail development is to avoid the **shopping center blight that is now sweeping our country**. According to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, this is known as “suburban sprawl.” It has proved time and time again to detract from distinctive, attractive, historical communities that are known to foster a strong sense of unity, and security.

Sprawl is extremely wasteful and fiscally irresponsible. Despite the addition of some undefined possible small uptick in tax rates, it abandons established downtown areas where substantial investments, both public and private, have been made. Simply put, if the Town Board does not limit retail growth to existing business districts, there will be continued deterioration in the form of vacancies and neglect in our shopping plazas and downtown areas.

- **Additional retail directly conflicts with the Orangetown Comprehensive Plan.** The Goals and Objectives for commercial development section explicitly states that the town:

*“will select geographic areas for economic activity that are suitable for commercial, office and industrial development in terms of location, access, and environmental constraints, **making certain that sites avoid conflicts with nearby uses.**”*

The Rockland County master plan echoes the Orangetown plan in terms of sensitivity to downtown areas:

*“Recommendations of this Plan seek to foster the cohesiveness of these downtown areas **to ensure their economic strength and provide a local retail and service alternative to suburban types of development both at a large and small scale.** Housing and transportation policies focus on these centers, channeling future development and redevelopment activities in order to strengthen their mixed-use character”.*

To support these articulated goals, our Town, County and State governments have already invested hundreds of thousands of dollars on streetscape improvements for established commercial areas in Orangetown. We believe any new retail development at the RPC site thwarts the effects of these soundly spent funds.

Elements Objected to by the Pearl River Chamber of Commerce(cont'd)

2) Single Family Non-age-restricted Dwellings

We'll focus briefly on single-family, non-age-restricted homes. Fortunately, only one proposal for the core RPC site included this type of development. And for good reason. This is the furthest thing from a clean ratable – in terms of additional burdens placed on our schools and increased burdens on our emergency services – all meaning more taxes for our businesses to incur.

3) Condominium-Style Offices

Let's move on to the proposal for condominium-style offices. While we acknowledge that office space at RPC would be a clean ratable, we must insist that there is not an urgent need for additional professional-sized office space in Orangetown.

- A review of current MLS office space listings for units under 10,000 sq feet yields more than one dozen units totaling 67,000 sq feet. Commercial Real Estate professionals we've consulted indicated that 80% to 90% of all such office space IS NOT listed through MLS, so truly were looking at only the tip of the iceberg in terms of available space in Orangetown. Given these figures, the inventory of vacant professional-sized offices available could be estimated to be at least 60 properties and well more than 300,000 square feet!
- The town is filled with plazas and office buildings eager to rent to long-term professional businesses. Renovation of our current structures is the greatest form of recycling. Creating new office space at RPC will exacerbate current vacancy problems and impact the entire surrounding area.

Summary and Conclusions

In summary, the Pearl River Chamber of Commerce strongly supports those many components of the RFQ submissions outlined above that can truly enhance Orangetown while providing much needed additional tax ratables. As importantly, we cannot support and will continue to fight against development that further stresses the school systems, transforms our town into a characterless suburban swath and undermines our established retail and commercial districts.

Your choices are clear. The valuable land we have now will have to serve us forever; your decisions will have extremely important consequences in the short and long term. In every town in America that has been devastated by unchecked, unneeded growth, there were surely people who simply shrugged it off as “the price of progress.” They were wrong. Development that destroys communities isn’t progress – it’s chaos. And it isn’t inevitable. It’s avoidable – or at the very least, controllable by our elected officials.

By your actions here you can support existing businesses or condemn them. You can stop suburban sprawl or aggravate a problem that is already consuming the country. You can stand by your original decisions to invest in the existing commercial districts throughout the town or you can be fiscally irresponsible and waste the monies already spent.