

From: [Eric Ratinoff](#)
To: [CityClerk](#)
Subject: Public Comment Regarding Mark Stebbins Community Center
Date: Tuesday, July 19, 2022 5:42:57 AM

Members of the Board of Mayor and Aldermen,

I am a 15-year resident of the West Side, and a parent of a student at Gossler Park School, and a student at the Middle School at Parkside, both of whom participate in the after-school program at the Boys & Girls Club. I also attended the two most recent public meetings regarding the Mark Stebbins Community Center, both held at Parkside.

At the most recent meeting on July 11, 2022, a number of concerns were raised, particularly from neighbors whose properties abut the proposed community center site. I appreciate their concerns – as property owners, they are materially invested in the West Side, and this project presents a change to the neighborhood. While change is often uncomfortable, unexpected change like this can be disorienting. While it is clear to me that the project team took all of the appropriate steps in the process – as soon as they knew this site was a possibility, they organized the July 11 meeting and sent notices to neighbors, which is above and beyond what is required – it is also clear that news of the choice of the Parkside site for the community center came as a surprise to these neighbors. So I understand their hesitation and defensiveness.

But a community is more than a collection of individuals and the buildings in which they live. A community is a collective, defined by all of the people who live in the neighborhood. And for a community to thrive, all of the people in that community need the infrastructure, the opportunity, and the resources to thrive.

On the West Side, however, many children and families are not thriving – they're struggling. Our schools have one of the highest rates of students receiving free and reduced lunch in the city. Many of our families are refugees and new Americans, working hard to navigate life in a new country while also learning a new language. Too many students in our schools are experiencing homelessness.

Yet despite this significant need on the West Side, the services our community needs are scarce. After-school programs once provided by 21st Century, a federally-funded program, have become increasingly restricted – our Gossler Park student, who once was able to benefit from the program 4 days a week, was only offered one day a week this past school year. After-school programs like The Boys & Girls Club and the YMCA must bus children over to the East Side, and their slots are limited – again, our student, who only had one day of afterschool with 21st Century, began the year on a waitlist at the Boys & Girls Club, and thankfully was able to get a spot. This lack of childcare often means that kids are left to their own devices after school, or parents cannot work during those after-school hours. Most of the other vital services that would be included in this new community center are lacking on the West Side as well.

And while the neighbors raised concerns about increases in traffic, both human and vehicle, that would come with the new community center, I think they are missing how that community center would actually address many of the concerns they have right now.

Residents expressed concerns about kids running around and being wild around Gossler and Parkside after school. After-school programs at a community center in walking distance to both – as well as to West High, meaning older siblings have access to programming, and can also pick up younger siblings -- would likely decrease that after-school chaos, and get those kids into quality programs with adult supervision, keeping them from finding ways to get into trouble in the neighborhood.

Residents also expressed concerns about increased vehicle traffic. But if students were able to go to before- and after-school programs right next door, the community center would decrease vehicle traffic at peak times and spread it out throughout the day, as far fewer parents would need to drop off or pick up at the beginning and end of the school day, ultimately creating less congestion in the area.

The need for the Stebbins Community Center on the West Side is clear. And the reasons for putting it on the Gossler/Parkside campus are compelling. This community center will be a long-overdue investment in the people and community of the West Side, and a catalyst that will help more of our families to thrive. For these reasons, I encourage you to support this project. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Eric Ratinoff
7 Valley West Way
Manchester, NH 03102

--

Eric Ratinoff
eric@storyfir.st

Explore our Gold Telly Award-winning project, [*Still Separate. Still Unequal.*](#)