

In March of 2013, 3 months after the tragedy at Sandy Hook School, an executive with GE came to my office with an offer that the company was interested in doing something substantial to benefit the community. This generosity grew out of a corporate recognition of the many GE employees who were residents of Newtown, numbering more than 120 at that time. A request was made that I come up with some ideas for the GE executive to take to a convocation of Newtown GE employees, called together by GE chair Jeff Immelt. Specifically, the prompt was “what are the greatest needs and what has the Town been trying to accomplish but not been able to move forward?”

Four ideas were discussed in this conversation – funding for: enhanced school safety; mental health support; Fairfield Hill campus redevelopment; or building a community center. The Newtown based GE employees met in convocation with GE leaders and executives to discuss those ideas and determined that the community center project best met their interest to do something substantial for the community.

Four general concepts emerged as part of the proposal to offer millions of dollars to Newtown for the building and operation of a community center: 1) that the funds be used to create a location that does not exist today to act as an anchor for the people of Newtown to come together; 2) that the community center serve the needs of the community with access to Newtown residents of all ages; 3) that the center has a positive impact to the community by adding services that do not currently exist; and 4) that the center enhances or adds capabilities to the town but does not remove existing community capabilities.

Thus the GE gift of \$10 million dollars to construct a center, with a \$1 million dollar fund each of five years to support operational costs, is further structured as donor intent as stated in these four general statements.

The gift from GE –with the attendant language – was affirmed and then made official in contract language and personal conversation between me and the chair of GE, Mr. Immelt.

The GE community center discussion, spring 2013, resurrected a plan that had been shelved a few years prior. That shelved plan (originally approved in referendum in 2007) was a facility to include two pools, some park and rec program space, and dedicated spaces for seniors. In 2009, two buildings (Litchfield Hall and Yale Labs) on the grounds of Fairfield Hills were demolished to provide a location for the proposed community center. That community center plan did not go forward for several reasons: insufficient resources, concerns with the footprint, and other internal conflicts. With the gift from GE of \$15 million, that original community center plan including two pools and senior spaces was resurrected and became the basis of planning for the future facility.

In 2014 an ad hoc committee of staff, GE representatives, commission on aging representatives, and others was tasked to identify current and future needs, review research of past years, update the original proposal, reach out to other constituent groups, and return to the BoS with recommendations. The work of this group continued for some 10 months, into winter of 2015.

In spring of 2015 a draft proposal was unveiled and modified several times with community input. Ultimately, I determined that public sentiment was not in support of the proposal and halted the initiative. Opposition to the proposal focused mostly on the notion of dedicated space for seniors, with other opposition against the aquatics component. The most consistent feedback was to return to the statements of donor intent – and especially the need to ensure access and programming space for a broader constituency in the community.

In 2015, the BoS appointed and charged a full commission to develop recommendations for a community center – based on more extensive outreach, needs assessments, and contact with the Newtown community. This group of community volunteers was charged with the same understandings as expressed in the donor intent with a special focus on community outreach. The Commission made an extraordinary effort over many, many months to connect with the community, gathering input and feedback throughout the process. (Never in my years here in Newtown has there been such a substantial and careful effort to reach out – and listen to – the community.) That extensive interaction with the

general community affirmed the Commission's sensitivity that the operational costs for the community center should not become a tax burden. Ultimately, the NCCC determined that two major features in a community center would best respond to the community interests and needs: aquatics and flexible, programmable space for general use. The challenge going forward was to align that plan with two standards: 1) not exceed the funding available to build - now \$15 million to build through the addition to the GE gift of a \$5 million CIP bond, and 2) that the annual operational costs not become a tax burden. The work of this Commission formally ended in April of 2016 when the proposal went to referendum. More work needed to be done, however, especially in terms of aligning costs to the business model. And so, some of these same volunteers graciously stayed with us as an advisory group to continue the effort to come up with a project that speaks to the heart of Newtown, lies within available funding to build, and which can be operated without putting undue stress on local taxes.

(The narrative continues in comments written and delivered By Geralyn Hoerauf, owner's representative for the Community Center project.)

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