

Zukin Project

West Chester Borough Council

12/01/2009

My name is Gordon Woodrow. I live at 620 North Matlack St. I am a businessman and serve on the Board of Directors of Partners for Sacred Places, a nationally-respected organization comprised of business leaders, clergy and architects with a mission of helping primarily inner city congregations gain financial skills needed to save their architecturally-significant buildings. I have lived in West Chester all but 2 of my 62 years – longer than most in this room save for Mayor Yoder, a man of infinite patience who, in 1962, as my football coach, gently convinced me that my fortune would lie somewhere outside of football.

I find it hard to believe I stand here as someone that can say “I remember when,” but here I stand. I hope to help restore the institutional memory that appears to have been lost over many changes in our economy and public policy history.

I think it fitting to remind you at this time of year of the Frank Capra film “It’s A Wonderful Life.” West Chester is Bedford Falls, and George Bailey’s nightmare of Pottersville is what we are becoming. I have seen this wonderful family town become an every-weekend Mardi Gras destination for countless numbers of avid partiers, even once personally coming close to having to defend myself against several drunken, testosterone-fueled boy/men because our host failed to park fast enough for their convenience. AND IT HAPPENS ALL THE TIME.

Serving a Pa. U.S. Senator for 10 years as his Chief of Staff, I have traveled and slept in most of Pa.’s 67 counties and have spent nights in some very unique environments. I assure you that a hotel built on top of a pharmacy may be a business model that works for an investor, but it is not one that predicts a first-class hospitality center for West Chester. It may well be acceptable in Pottsville but it should not be acceptable here. What you will have is a huge, challenged building, with no scale in relation to the street, that includes clip-on ornamentation more fitting for Disneyworld. Simply put: an affront to the rich history of West Chester and not inspiring to other investors wanting something more in line with a small, vibrant, architecturally-interesting venue.

Mr. Zukin cares about his business first and foremost. When it comes to balance sheets, he is one of the best. Many people in town have asked me, “Why are you so much against what Stan is doing?” I will tell you why. As a former member of the HARB (Hist. Arch. Review Board) I was present for the early stages of the Zukin vision for this property. That was 27 years ago! I submit to you time and what that property has looked like as a prime example of Mr. Zukin’s commitment to West Chester. It is his bottom line, not ours. That is his right and privilege under the greatest economic system in the world.

But we all need to understand that it is this government’s RESPONSIBILITY to guard the interests of West Chester beyond tax revenue (I might add that in my 29 years in politics I have yet to see taxes ever balance against services demanded by new development – ever!) West Chester is not responsible for assuring success of a private business model. West Chester is a

brand that needs to be managed wisely. West Chester should be setting standards high so businesses can and will build in accordance with a vision that puts forth something that reflects values and an environment we all aspire to. During my years in Washington, I saw what unchallenged, well-funded special interests can do. It is troubling to me that there seems to be no outrage and very little attention to standards for managing the West Chester brand or even to recent history.

I remind you that Mr. Zukin's very able legal council has correctly stated, when questioned about willingness to agree to controls on drive-thru service options for use, that they could not, because **"circumstances change."** A very appropriate business response. When High Street School was torn down, several years before the development business caught up with adaptive reuse of historically- and architecturally-interesting buildings, the very same assurances were asked for by then Borough Council and were given the same response with the caveat: "We do not see that in the future." **"Circumstances changed,"** and within one year, Burger King had drive-thru service.

There has been much discussion about "green technology." We started with a proposal for geothermal heating. **"Circumstances have changed,"** and the business model does not support. We hear about high-efficiency appliances and roofing materials. These are business bottom line decisions and have to do with the green of the bottom line. They just happen to coincide with the Borough's interest in green environmental sustainability. When "circumstances change," so to the business plans. What happens when we agree to let one of the earliest examples of Black American entrepreneurship in America, the Spence Café, be ravaged to a shell of itself, and **"circumstances change,"** and it is found to then be too weak to remain? We have also been told this evening that the devil is in the details. I see many devils. Ladies and gentlemen, there are more audible calls in this deal than on any given NFL Sunday. Mr. Zukin knows how to call them, and our defense is good intentions? I submit to you now is the time to force the issue. Once you grant conditional use as requested, you will be setting precedent for the Mosteller block and for every other development plan that comes before you.

While I profess to being a "recovering politician," I still remember the first rule of politics: "Never let you face show how bad your butt is getting kicked." West Chester's butt is getting kicked, and many of us would like to see fewer stoic faces and more concern for what precedents for the future are being set here.

A friend recently challenged me with a powerful statement: "What will we have to show for our time on earth?" I, for one, sure hope it is more than this. Let the record show there were those that stood up and said we can do better.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my views on what will be a transformational decision by this council in the future of this architecturally-rich community for years to come.