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Nursing home may give P.S. 163 room to expand

P.S. 163, an elementary school on 97th Street, may expand into a nursing home facility if Jewish Home Lifecare's land swap is successful.

By Sarah Darville
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Sarah Darville for spectator

The answer to P.S. 163's problems of overcrowding may lie in the block's newest nursing home.

P.S. 163, an elementary school on 97th Street between Amsterdam and Columbus avenues, may get a chance to expand with the potential construction of a controversial new facility for Jewish Home Lifecare.

The school is in discussions with JHL to secure space in the nursing home's new building on 100th Street when it is constructed, and to possibly to build a bridge between the two buildings.

JHL hopes to develop a 22-story facility through a land swap with developer Chetrit Group,

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by which the nursing home would gain property on 100th Street, currently owned by Chetrit. In this swap, Chetrit would develop on JHL's current site on 106th.

Ethan Geto, spokesperson for JHL, said that the group has been speaking with the school about including pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms as well as art or music rooms in the new facility.

"The school has said that they have not made up their minds about some or all of the kinds of spaces they want, so we are waiting on them," he said.

If the school did request extensive space, Geto said the building's architectural plans would have to be amended.

"We can't do all of that within original plan for the nursing home—that space is allocated to skilled nursing care. The community and elected officials would have to accept the fact that building might need to add on a story or two depending on what the school asks for," he said.

Carrie Reynolds, co-president of P.S. 163's Parent Teacher Association, confirmed that the school has had meetings with JHL.

Currently, the school has four kindergarten classes operating in trailers due to overcrowding, a situation that Reynolds said is not sustainable.

"Looking ahead, when the trailers near the end of their lifespan, and with JHL coming into the space right behind that, it's logical to see if we could share space," she said, adding that she thinks that the added area is more likely to be made up of multipurpose rooms like dance studios.

But she acknowledged that increasing the height of buildings in this area is not an easy sell.

"I know people don't like tall buildings, but perhaps if they see the benefit to lots of different groups they might think differently. It's not a high-rise apartment building going up, where it's hard to see the benefit," Reynolds said.

Geto said that the Bloomingdale branch of the New York Public Library, which sits adjacent to the parking lot, would have to be relocated into the nursing home as well.

"If we're able to do that ... we can have a walkway directly between P.S. 163 and the new nursing facility, so the kids can walk in a sheltered way to the library," he said.

The building height is only one concern for some neighborhood residents who have been fighting the larger Columbus Square development surrounding P.S. 163.

Jean Green Dorsey, who lives across the street from the school, doubted that putting school space in the nursing home would work.

"That was somebody's fantasy," she said, adding, "They'd have to tear down ... the library and rebuild the whole complex, which makes no sense whatsoever," she said. "Nobody's

seen a comprehensive plan, no one's done a traffic study, or environmental review.”

Any space for the school would require public funding, the acquisition of which Geto and Reynolds both agreed is uncertain, given the city's current budget.

Though funds could be divided over the next few fiscal years, Geto said basic decisions about how they will configure the building need to be made in the next four to eight weeks before the city has to submit the budget.

All of these plans are still tentative because Jewish Home Lifecare has not officially completed the land swap with Chetrit to take over the property on 100th Street, currently a parking lot, where JHL hopes to build its new facility.

While JHL explores options for school development, a long-time land-zoning war is also keeping the nursing home busy.

When Chetrit and JHL announced the land swap in August 2009, local preservationist groups spoke out against the nursing home, fearing that Chetrit would take advantage of less-restrictive zoning regulations on 106th Street.

The more lenient guidelines on 106th, which allow for taller development, were preserved in a zoning exemption granted to JHL in 2007 to allow it to build a new facility on its original site.

JHL has been working for months with community groups to write a restrictive declaration, which would legally bind Chetrit to develop contextually under stricter zoning rules once the swap is completed.

Community Board 7 Chair Mel Wymore said Wednesday that lawyers are working on the final details of the restrictive declaration, which is “within days, if not hours away” from being finished.

But City Council member Melissa Mark-Viverito, who represents Manhattan Valley, has said that this kind of document is not enough, and has been pushing to raise funds to downzone 106th immediately herself. This would legally change zoning laws now on 106th so that all developments, whether JHL moves or stays, will be contextual.

“It's going to cost \$150,000 to \$200,000. We're talking with the mayor's office. It could be done through allocations the Borough President could make, city planning could make—they have discretionary funds,” Mark-Viverito said. “We haven't abandoned the idea.”

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