A site rendering of the outside of Park Point, courtesy of Chaintreuil/Jansen/Stark Architects.

On Point

Students, professors, residents weigh in on SUNY's Park Point
by Mike Townshend

COLLEGE OFFICIALS AND developer Wilmore have seized on Nov. 2's public hearing for Park Point, the proposed on-campus apartment complex, as a clear sign of progress. That hearing, before the New Paltz Town Planning Board, played out before a standing-room-only crowd that filled Town Hall with at least 70 people.

A majority of people who spoke had some association with SUNY New Paltz. Planning Board members heard from professors, college staffers, students and a handful of concerned neighbors. Much of what they had to say was positive.

Professor Gerald Benjamin, the director of the college's Center for Research Regional Education and Outreach, said that the college could "double down" on its commitment to offering a residential university experience if the rental housing were built.

Right now, online college course offerings from companies like Coursera, Udacity and edX have traditional real-world universities a little worried about the future. Add to that demographics shifting in New York to an older population with fewer college-aged residents, fewer expected high school graduates and high competition with other higher ed institutions and the situation comes into focus.

"We're saying that we can be competitive with a residential college experience in the 21st Century -- even though Harvard and Stanford and MIT are giving courses to tens of thousands of people across the globe over the Internet," the professor said.

Benjamin said he felt Park Point would make SUNY New Paltz stand out, because it would provide transfer students and young faculty members a place to live in a nearly rented-out village. Healthy rental markets have at least 5 percent vacancies - New Paltz has 0.3 percent. That makes it difficult for students and SUNY employees to find a place to stay. It can mean months of waiting.
Brian Obach, a sociology professor at the college, also favored building the proposed 732-bed faculty and student housing complex. Obach tried to make it clear he was speaking for himself, but he also serves on the SUNY New Paltz Sustainability Committee. That environmental group has endorsed the proposal to build the Park Point facility because it should reduce the carbon footprint of students and faculty who no longer have to commute to campus.

"I have opposed many developments actively. But I'm not anti-development. I oppose what I think are bad developments," he said. "But this is a good development, and I support it."

College officials hope the developer will be able to attract transfer students -- who often find themselves cut out of the housing loop when they get to New Paltz.

"We also know that many prospective transfer students either don't apply to New Paltz when they learn we can't provide housing. Or they apply, they're accepted and they choose to go elsewhere where they can live on or near campus," explained Donald Christian, the SUNY New Paltz president.

In a press release from the college, SUNY New Paltz and apartment complex developer Wilmorite painted the public hearing as a clear win for the Park Point project.

"This is a significant step forward in the approval process and we are encouraged by the broad support that Park Point has received. We have been working with the town and campus community since 2009 and recognize the importance of public participation in review of the project," said Tom George, Wilmorite's director of business development, in the release.

That press release states that roughly 20 people spoke in favor of the project, which is only true if the shades of gray are eliminated and both positive comments and mixed or neutral comments are counted together. Environmental concerns were a key issue for the students that spoke -- even if they admitted that more housing was needed.

Students and environmentalists both questioned the safety of the 42 acres on Route 32 South where Park Point is to be built. Because that lot has a long history as an orchard, skeptics worry that the toxic, pesticide-laden soil will not be dealt with correctly. Tests done by Wilmorite for the State Environmental Quality Review do show a higher-than-allowable level of arsenic in the soil. However, a similar test of drinking water at the site shows acceptable arsenic levels.

Robert LoBianco, a member of the SUNY New Paltz Student Senate, is a good example of the kind of mixed response many students displayed.

"I remember when I transferred to New Paltz. I had that same difficulty in getting student housing.
I remember coming to New Paltz a couple of weeks after I was accepted, because I knew I would need a head start in finding an apartment. And it took me a couple of months,” LoBianco said. “But I was lucky enough to find a great house outside the village.”

While he admitted that student housing was inadequate in New Paltz, the student senator also had several worries:

“I think the discussion should be reframed. I don’t think it should be about whether the project is needed -- the vast majority of the college and the town can agree that it’s needed,” he said. “But it’s about how do we get there.”

Students, along with LoBianco, asked the developer to add more green technology features to the site plan, including possibly renewable energy. They

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also wanted to see the developer match SUNY New Paltz’s commitment to green building standards. College officials recently sent out word touting that the renovation of Crispell Hall achieved a LEED Gold certification with the U.S. Green Building Council. Students felt it was contradictory to market the environmental sustainability of one part of campus while allowing a more lax standard elsewhere.

While the college proper will benefit from the project, technically the parcel on Route 32 is owned
by the not-for-profit SUNY New Paltz Foundation through a subsidiary called Goshawk LLC. The Foundation will own the land and lease it to Wilmorite over a period of 30 years. After that time, ownership will revert to the college.

Another adjacent 8 acres of land owned by the Moriello family will be utilized by Park Point for sewage treatment.

Park Point will also offer about 30 units of townhouse-style residences for new faculty and staff who have similar difficulty finding proximate housing that enables them to become an integral part of the residential college community. Park Point would feature 10 buildings for students and three buildings for faculty, along with a clubhouse that will house management offices, a fitness center, group study rooms and a resident lounge. Total project development costs are estimated between $45 million and $50 million.

Rochester-based Wilmorite has made a name for themselves building other similar campus housing projects at Syracuse University and the Rochester Institute of Technology.

Wilmorite still has a long way to go to get Park Point approved. Last week’s public hearing dealt with their Draft Environmental Impact Statement. By law, the developer has to take questions asked during the hearing and answer them in the final version of the document.

Also, this current public hearing has not yet closed. The town will still accept written comments about the project and a second leg of the hearing is scheduled for Nov. 19, according to Planning Board Chairman Mike Calimano.

Further details on Park Point are available at www.newpaltz.edu/parkpoint or www.parkpointnewpaltz.com.++