

# The Villager

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## St. Vincent's Decision All About Good Government



By Arthur Y. Webb

This is truly a historic day for our country. There has never been more of a time when we need a classic good government approach to the daunting issues facing all of us.

Right here in our community there was another historic moment recently when good government was in full force.

Doing the right thing is never easy.

But that's exactly what the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission did last week: Its members did the right thing.

By a 6-4 vote, the Commission voted to approve St. Vincent's hardship application, which will allow demolition of the O'Toole Building to make way for a much needed new hospital in the Village.

Our community truly requires a new acute care facility, one that is configured both physically and programmatically to use 21st Century resources and responses to address modern health care needs and demands.

What confronted Landmarks in the case of St. Vincent's were two competing and worthy public policy arguments – the demand to create state-of-the-art medical facilities to give our community the care it needs and deserves, and a desire to maintain the historical landscape of Greenwich Village.

There is passion on both sides.

At Village Care of New York, another important health care provider in the downtown community, we share both those passions.

We are fully aware of the imperative need for modern health care as well as the demands to address concerns of community residents and the desire to maintain the Village's character. In a much smaller way, we faced a similar and arduous process in our quest to build our new Village Center for Rehabilitation and Nursing, which is now under construction on West Houston Street.

It has been clear to me that in order for St. Vincent's to adhere to its community mission effectively and efficiently, it needs to re-use its property, including the land where the O'Toole building is situated.

What the community needed most, though, was a dispassionate and thorough review of St. Vincent's hardship application.

That's what we got from the Landmarks Preservation Commission, particularly through the leadership of its chairman, Robert Tierney.

Tierney assembled a collection of experts from city and state agencies to examine closely whether St. Vincent's had a feasible alternative to building on its current site. The Commission members spent hours poring over documents and precedents related to the hardship provision to determine its applicability. Tough, probing questions were asked – and answered. In the end, in the opinion of a majority of the Commission, led by Tierney, the facts warranted the hardship exemption.

The Commission and Tierney worked tirelessly to solicit opinions from Village residents, elected officials and medical experts in the effort to determine what St. Vincent's must do to provide quality health care while holding on to the architectural fabric that ties the Village together.

Tierney has called on St. Vincent's and its development partner, the Rudin Organization, to alter their plans in order to meet this balance. He has worked with them to provide for the reuse of four existing buildings east of Seventh Avenue when the original plans called for their demolition. St. Vincent's also reduced the new facility's footprint, slicing both significant height and width from two major proposed buildings as a result of the Commission's and the community's advice.

He will continue to monitor the progress of the St. Vincent's project, telling The Villager, "We will require that no demolition is attempted until all required approvals and financing for the project are in place."

There is, of course, much to be done before St. Vincent's new hospital is a reality. And, this being the Village, and New York City, you can be sure that those who continue to oppose this plan will be vociferous.

Landmarks, however, has allowed the 150-year-old health care institution to take an important first step in providing 21st Century health care to meet the growing needs of downtown and the West Side.

There remain a number of applications for Certificates of Appropriateness that have been filed by St. Vincent's and Rudin in the process to make this much needed project a reality.

It seems certain from the example that the Commission has set by its hardship application ruling, that those decisions will not be based on expediency, on who yells the loudest or on what a poll might say.

The decisions will be based on the merits.

As they should be.

*(Mr. Webb is the president and chief executive officer of not-for-profit Village Care of New York, Inc.)*