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After Controversy, Jewish Home Lifecare Sets Groundbreaking

BY MEGAN FINNEGAN BUNGEROTH

Jewish Home Lifecare, the nonprofit that runs elder care facilities in Manhattan and the Bronx, has confirmed that they plan to break ground on a new facility on West 97th Street between Amsterdam and Columbus avenues in February 2013. They expect the facility to be operational by the spring of 2017.

The announcement follows several years in which Jewish Home searched for a location to construct a new type of nursing home, based on a "greenhouse" model that favors clusters of rooms as opposed to the traditional, hospital-like corridors with shared rooms lining each long hallway. The 24-story tower will have beds for 288 residents, arranged in 12-room clusters around shared living and kitchen spaces.

While some hail this plan as a step forward in elder care, others in the local community have expressed concern not only over the design but the way in which Jewish Home acquired the current space.

In 2007, Jewish Home planned to build the vertical facility at the site of their current location on West 106th Street. After obtaining the requisite *permits* and a zoning exemption, they could not find a development partner to purchase part of the site and finance the project.

After considering a site on West 100th Street that developer Joseph Chetrit was willing to sell in exchange for the 106th Street parcel, Jewish Home finally landed on West 97th Street, where they will build on what is currently the parking lot for the Park West Village apartment complex. In exchange, they sold the 106th Street lot to Chetrit.

Cathy Unsino, a local resident and advocate for nursing home reform across the country, has been vocal about her opposition to the design of the new Jewish Home facility, suggesting that the stacked units will create too much isolation.

"When people are losing physical strength and some people are losing cognitive ability, you want to foster as many connections as possible," Unsino said, "The higher you go, for people with physical difficulties, the more the feeling of helplessness is engendered."

Unsino said she's frustrated by the lack of communication and transparency from Jewish Home about their plans. Daniel White, a representative for Jewish Home, said that they plan to work with Community Board 7 as well as community leaders and elected officials and have, in fact, been doing so for months.

"We will propose the establishment of a Community Advisory Board including tenant and community leaders and the local elected officials to work with us both leading up to and throughout the construction process and will continue to be open and responsive," White said in an email. They also plan to set up a construction advisory committee with members of the community and establish a 24/7 complaint hotline to address problems that arise from construction.

But some residents are worried about the effects long after construction is finished.

"97th Street can be a very crowded street because of the transverse," said Hillel Hoffman, a retired attorney who lives next to the site. "We are very concerned that the traffic that the home itself will generate will become a big problem for us."

Mark Diller, chair of Community Board 7, said that the application filed by Jewish Home with the Department of City Planning has triggered a review process by the board, which will probably involve a public comment session in January.

"As with all matters relating to the proposed relocation of JHL's facility to 97th Street, CB7 takes this application seriously, and will be attentive to the needs and concerns of those in the community it will affect," Diller said in an email.

In the meantime, White said that Jewish Home is working on renderings and detailed plans for the new facility and plans to share them with the community as soon as they are available.