

# Despite lofty track record, McLean faces tide of resistance

Ofentimes when concerns arise about opening a certain type of facility in a community, they are borne out of a checkered past tied to that entity.

No one need look further than the South Middlesex Opportunity Council, which once considered opening a facility on Pleasant Street in Gardner in early 2009. With a history tied to some of its facilities that has raised red flags in some eyes — even to where one critic of the organization created a website, [www.smocing-ham.org](http://www.smocing-ham.org), to outline many the concerns — such resistance seems to hold some merit.

By contrast, the nonprofit Belmont-based McLean Hospital, which has local facilities in Ashburnham and Princeton, has begun with plans to open a substance abuse and psychological treatment facility in Templeton by next summer. During a packed Planning Board meeting on Nov. 13, Dr. Philip Levendusky, senior vice president for business development and communications for the hospital, detailed that despite the ease of concluding that such facilities are a burden on a community, “We’ve never had any problems or complaints from our neighbors.”

For those who might want to take the cynical view that someone working for the hospital

would simply spin such fiction for their own benefit, Dr. Levendusky noted the content of letters read at the meeting by Edward Blanchard, owner of the 676 Baldwinville Road property that is looking to be sold to McLean. In those letters, the Ashburnham and Princeton police chiefs wrote that they had not received complaints or had issues with neighbors related to those two facilities.

## ON FURTHER REVIEW



ANDRES  
CAAMANO

“As Mr. Blanchard indicated, as he went through the effort to contact the local police authorities, you heard their responses, that we are extremely good neighbors,” added Dr. Levendusky.

In addition, the assessors in the two towns also determined that there was no resulting decrease in the value of homes surrounding the two facilities, or even a decrease in the number of sales.

“The concerns about property

values are often raised, as are the concerns about safety, and the serenity (being lost in the community),” added Dr. Levendusky.

Such home value calculations seem to hold true in the context, though, when recognizing that McLean Hospital has numerous facilities in Belmont. Average home sale value in that community in the last year? Approximately \$650,000.

McLean also has a facility in Waltham, where the average home sale came in at around \$350,000 in the last year.

To drive home the point further, Dr. Levendusky said, “Four or five years ago, the hospital rezoned some of its land so it could be developed as residential property. It’s right next to the hospital, and what was built on the land was high price point condominiums. If you took the argument that residences would drop in value, instead they sold in a remarkably quick amount of time (and having gone) on the market in 2008, at the lowest point in the real estate market.”

Much of that is a result of what Dr. Levendusky credits as the hospital’s “200-year history, and there are pretty strong credentials, and when we say we will do it, we will do it exceptionally well.”

Faced with such facts as a backdrop, that did little to couch the over-the-top language voiced

by some concerned residents during the Nov. 13 meeting in discussing the prospect of the Baldwinville Road property being purchased by McLean and expanded by an additional 2,880 square feet, with plans to house an average of 16 patients.

Lacking any negative history to glom onto regarding McLean, a resident nonetheless declared, “I will not be comfortable in my neighborhood anymore,” even though the town has never sought to keep out all individuals who have either had substance abuse or psychological issues, which Dr. Levendusky referenced when he added, “In that audience, there were people with substantial concerns, but there were others (who have had to recover from prior substance abuse or psychological issues, and they know that they are not a danger.”

Even upon hearing the concerns voiced by the Templeton residents, Dr. Levendusky said, “To be fair, I’ve done a number of these meetings, and they all have a similar characteristic. People are not aware of what we do. Part of it is educational, and we all have been subject to jumping to conclusions when we don’t have all the facts. We’re hopeful that they will be more comfortable with the idea in time.”

While some on hand at the meeting are seeking to prevent

McLean from opening a facility in the town, knowing that in the end, SMOC did open a facility in Gardner this summer on Pearl Street, such resistance really can only slow down such an opening — not prevent it.

Knowing that it is in the hospital’s best interest to maintain its well-earned reputation built over many years — from being ranked first among all free-standing hospitals by U.S. News & World Report to its being the largest psychiatric facility for the Harvard Medical School — the illusion that McLean would casually staff a facility at the risk of residents in the community isn’t based on any prior history.

Even for those organizations blessed with solid reputations, there’s still the unavoidable fear that in the blink of an eye, that reputation could evaporate if it allows for carelessness to enter into the equation. While some Templeton residents last week talked about being bothered that treatment facility patients could freely leave the premises and roam the neighborhood at will, we’re talking patients being housed in the facility — not prisoners.

While some may blindly opt to bundle such patients and prisoners into a singular group of “bad people” with the comment that the patients could be allowed to

“walk around town with all the children and grandchildren, and it’s only a block away from (the Narragansett middle and high schools),” such veiled language is typically reserved for describing a sex offender walking the streets, which forced Dr. Levendusky to clarify that such facilities do not house sex offenders or people with criminal records.

“These people are pre-screened, usually have jobs and intact families, and typically return to their homes after,” he said at the meeting.

If McLean took such a tack as to lock up their patients as practically suggested by some at the meeting, it’s unlikely that the McLean Center at Fernside in Princeton or the McLean Ambulatory Treatment Center at Naukeag in Ashburnham would be have many patients to serve.

And if either facility had its share of issues, especially the one in Ashburnham, having covered the town a reporter for three months in 2004, and since then having kept a keen eye from an editor’s desk, having only learned of the Naukeag facility in the midst of the Templeton resistance should be rather telling.

*(Andres Caamano is the Senior News Editor/NIE Director at The Gardner News. He can be reached at [acaamano@thegardnernews.com](mailto:acaamano@thegardnernews.com).)*