

A Radio Tower for Riverside

By ROBERTA B. KRATZ

The owner of an 18-story Riverside Drive hotel wants to build a radio tower on the roof that would be taller than the building itself.

Don Lewis, owner of FM radio station WHBI, owns and resides at the Riverside Towers Hotel, 80 Riverside Dr., at 80th Street. The radio tower for WHBI is currently atop the Ritz Tower at Park Avenue and 57th Street.

Lewis claims a commercial structure under construction would interfere with transmission from the 57th Street location. Since WHBI already operates out of basement offices in the Riverside Towers, Lewis says it would be the logical place for relocation of the transmitter. Since Riverside Drive is a strictly zoned residential area, a zoning variance is required from the Board of Standards and Appeals. Community Board 7, legislators led by Councilman Ted Weiss and an assortment of neighboring homeowners and apartment dwellers have expressed opposition to the plan for a variety of reasons.

Called Ugly

"For one thing it would be terribly ugly," says Les Wolff who resides on 80th Street, across from the hotel. "They're now operating the FM station there illegally and if they get approval for the tower, it would be legalizing a commercial venture on Riverside Drive."

Wolff argues that the hotel is 148 feet high and with the radio tower would be 338 feet high, "making it the tallest structure on Riverside—the equivalent of almost 40 stories."

Two engineers and two architects, Wolff says, examined the plans and claim it is "impossible" for the hotel, which is approximately 40 by 41 feet, to sustain the radio tower without being a danger to the surrounding community.

Lewis says his designing engineers have taken into account all potential dangers, including high winter winds. Lewis purchased the building in 1968 and resides in its penthouse. The hotel, he says, is a money-losing proposition and the only reason he can maintain its "first class quality" is because of the station profits.

WHBI serves the metropolitan area with primarily foreign language programs. "It is economically unfeasible to maintain the hotel without the radio station," Lewis says.

If the variance is denied, Lewis adds, "It is highly likely that I would sell the hotel or turn it over to a managing agent who says he could guarantee me \$30,000 a year profit as long as I don't care what kind of tenants it gets. You can imagine what that means—an overnight slum."

The hotel was built in 1927 as a residence for Columbia Law School graduate students. It was sold after the 1929 crash and has been a hotel ever since.