

Report: Community Meeting for Residents of McCarley Gardens

The University at Buffalo Center for Urban
Studies

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This report is on the first of three meetings with residents of the Fruit Belt, which will be held regarding the construction of 49 new town houses that St. John Fruit Belt Community Development Corporation will be building in the neighborhood. The first of these meetings was held with residents of McCarley Gardens. The reason is that Rev. Chapman wanted to make sure that residents understood that the townhouse construction was not related to the sale of McCarley Gardens. This report will consist of two parts. The first part will provide a general overview of the meeting and offer some general impressions of the outcome, while the second part will provide a record of the comments that were made during the meeting.

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Report
Community Meeting with the McCarley Residents
The Bennett W. Smith, Sr. Family Life Center
The Fruit Belt
December 5, 2011

Introduction

This is the first of three meetings with residents of the Fruit Belt, which will be held regarding the construction of 49 new town houses which the St. John Fruit Belt Community Development Corporation will be building in the neighborhood. The first of these meetings was held with residents of McCarley Gardens because Rev. Chapman wanted to make sure that residents understood that the townhouse construction was not related to the potential sale of McCarley Gardens. This report will consist of two parts. The first part will provide a general overview of the meeting and offer some general impressions of the outcome, while the second part will provide a record of the comments that were made during the meeting.

General Overview

Approximately 32 people attended the community meeting. Of those, about 24 lived in the McCarley Gardens, with the remaining eight individuals living in other parts of the Fruit Belt or city. These individuals did not provide addresses when they signed into the meeting.



There was one member of the press was present –*ArtVoice*—and a representative of UB’s United University Professions was there. Although that person did not identify himself, a union representative gave a firsthand summary of the meeting on the organization’s Listserv the following day. The non-residents notwithstanding, the dialogue at the meeting was driven by persons known to be residents of the community.

The format of the meeting was to hold a general discussion followed by small group discussions, where the residents would have the opportunity to express their views and concerns in a smaller, more intimate gathering, which would facilitate greater interaction and engagement.

The Opening Session

Professor Henry Louis Taylor, Jr. opened the meeting by indicating that the purpose of gathering was threefold. The first was to provide them with an update on the potential selling of McCarley Gardens, the second was to inform them of the construction of 49 new townhouses in the Fruit Belt, and the third was to discuss any issues relating to the possible sale of McCarley and the relocation of the residents within the Fruit Belt or some other locale.



Reverend Chapman made three critical points in his overview of Fruit Belt development, including the potential sale of the McCarley Gardens.



1. He indicated that St. John was going to build 49 townhouses in the Fruit Belt and that these structures would be part of the overall Fruit Belt redevelopment strategy. Within this framework of Fruit Belt redevelopment, Rev. Chapman mentioned the Mini-Market and Dental Office that was being constructed on High Street. The goal of the redevelopment strategy was to use the community rebuilding process was to redevelop the community and to create jobs and opportunities for the residents.



2. Chapman stressed that the 49 new townhouses were not related to the potential sale of McCarley Gardens. They were two separate and distinct projects, although McCarley residents desirous of moving into the townhouses would be able to apply for residency in the new units. Those applications, he said, would be welcomed.
3. Chapman indicated that no progress has been made in the potential sale of the McCarley Gardens since the last meeting, almost two years ago. He again stressed that the church wanted to sell the property as a way of circumventing the continually rising maintenance cost, as well as to leverage resources for the redevelopment of the Fruit Belt. On this point, Chapman stressed that the redevelopment of the Fruit Belt, however, was not tied to sale of McCarley. Without or without the sale of the property, St. Johns was going to move forward with the redevelopment of the Fruit Belt.

Response to Chapman's Overview

A robust conversation took place following Chapman's overview of redevelopment activities. During the session, the resident's greatest concern was centered on the sale of McCarley Gardens.



There were several critical points made by the residents.

1. The residents attending the meeting made it clear that they opposed the sale, and this was the start point in their deliberations. This perspective is important because Rev. Chapman emphasized that construction of the 49 townhouses had nothing to do with McCarley. Nonetheless, the residents felt that St. John still wanted to sell McCarley; therefore, they wanted to make it clear that they still opposed the sale.

2. Residents expressed concern over the design limitations of the 49 townhouses. Rev. Chapman indicated that the State's new tax credit laws stated that porches and basements could not be included in the design of units. This was upsetting to residents, making some believe that the design standards for the homes replacing McCarley, where were articulated two years ago would not be followed. Although Chapman repeated stated that this was legal issue over which he had no control, it did not make the residents feel better. Our view is that this issue, over which St. John had no control, nevertheless increased distrust and deepened the divide between the church and the residents.
3. This appeared to be essentially a trust issue. The residents were seemingly saying, "You said the designs would be one way and now they are another. How do we know that other things you are telling us will be changed because of forces outside our control? Why should we believe you?" This also suggest that there need to be deeper and more ongoing communications between the church and residents regarding issues that might impact McCarley.
4. If McCarley is sold, the residents want to stay in the Fruit Belt proper. The sentiment of those attending the meeting was that if McCarley is sold they do not want to live outside the traditional Fruit Belt, including the nearby Cold Springs neighborhood.

Final Observations

The sentiments expressed in this meeting are repeats of viewpoints which have been consistently expressed by the residents. The great majority of residents seem opposed to the sale of McCarley Gardens and their relocation to other sections of the Fruit Belt.

The UB Center for Urban Studies believes this viewpoint is based on the resident's apprehension about the loss of community, which is a social, not an economic issue. This issue, we believe, is aggravated because there have been no systematic efforts to resolve the social dimensions of the sale of McCarley. Instead, the focus continues to be on the economic side of the equation.

McCarley Gardens is more than a clustering of apartments where people live. It is a community, where people are tied together by a network of social relations. It is also a place filled with memories that provide people with a sense of self and important connections to the past. So, when people are asked to move, it is important to understand that they are not simply leaving one apartment for another. Also, they are living their community and the memories connected to it. This is a huge loss. Consequently, when the residents are told, "Your new apartments will be better than the ones you currently live in," it says that they are not being heard, that St. John does not get it.

It is essential that the social component of the McCarley issue be understood and accounted for in the sale of McCarley and the relocation strategy. If this does not happen, the opposition to the move will persist and problems will probably mount.

People are concerned, for example, about the social dimension of the moving process. They want to know if they will be allowed to stay in the Fruit Belt proper and what input they will have in deciding where in the Fruit Belt they can live and who will be their neighbor.

St. John should establish easy process that will give the residents greater input into these types of decisions, as well as having them a voice in determining how to keep the memories of McCarley alive and how to shape the streetscape and other amenities on the blocks where they will live.



The problem is being compounded by the absence of a resident participatory strategy that more actively involves them in the planning of the redevelopment project. Our sense is that the residents feel alienated from the planning and development process and that they are only being called in public meetings to brief them on what has been happening.

It is our belief that St. John can do much more in involving the residents in the neighborhood planning process. We believe that St. John has done a great deal, but there is still room for

much improvement. If residents are truly integrated into the process and allowed to make decisions about what is going to happen to them and the locations in which they will possibly live in the future, they may become more supportive.

**Notes from St. John Baptist Church Meeting with McCarley Garden Residents
December 5, 2011**

Welcome

Dr. Henry L. Taylor, Jr.

Update on the status of the sale of McCarley Gardens

Reverend Chapman

- There is a \$500M plan to develop the Fruit Belt and the East Side of Buffalo. RC said that he has been to the White House grounds about this plan, which looks to develop housing/townhouses in the Fruit Belt, develop High Street as a commercial corridor, and includes a grocery store and other amenities.
- There was a meeting between St. John and HUD 6-7 months ago about the process if St. John was to choose to sell McCarley Gardens and move the residents in order for UB to purchase the land.
- A \$16M Tax Credit application has been approved by New York State which will allow St. John to build 49 townhouses in the Fruit Belt and St. John Project target area.
 1. St. John is in the process of closing the Tax Credit project with a bank.
 2. One of the purposes of the project is to create jobs for the community in order to combat the high unemployment rate among African-Americans.
 - The project will ensure that 60% of the workforce will be made up of African-Americans.
 - There is nothing that comes close to that percentage of the workforce anywhere in the country.
 - This will be a national model for workforce participation and neighborhood development.
 - St. John has spent \$15M in the last 9 years to set up this model.
- There is currently no approval and no particulars from HUD over the sale of McCarley Gardens to UB.
 1. If it were to occur, it would involve everyone from McCarley Gardens.
 2. Rents would be \$200-\$250 less from what McCarley Garden residents pay now
- The townhouse project has nothing to do with McCarley Gardens
 1. Once the townhouses are built, after a year they would look to see what would need to be done to move McCarley residents.
- St. John's goal is to create jobs
- The Center for Urban Studies job is to get an idea of what problems, concerns, and/or assistance is needed if McCarley residents were to move.

- As of now, this is all preliminary, but tonight’s meeting is a way to getting input from McCarley residents into the process.
- McCarley residents would be scattered – no longer one site.

Reaction to Chapman’s Overview:

Question: *What is going on with the land at Virginia and Ellicott? Who is this for?*

Answer: It is for the Buffalo-Niagara Medical Campus.

1. It is not leased and it has not been sold.
2. The only thing allowed on that land is lights, benches, and grass.

Resident Response:

3. **Resident Concern** – Worried that the small piece of land developed will turn into the sale of more land.
4. **Resident comment** – Why couldn’t we do the work to install the benches?
5. **Resident comment** – Why hasn’t the park by the medical campus used black men to do the construction?

Question: *Is McCarley Gardens sold? I heard that McCarley Gardens has been sold.*

Answer: UB wants to buy McCarley Gardens and there is an agreement with UB, but there are still issues to clear with up with HUD before any sale takes place.

- One of those issues is you cannot displace McCarley residents. There is a hard one to one replace in effect.
 - St. John can meet this requirement by building 150 townhouses.
- However, the 49 townhouses will be built regardless of the status of McCarley.
 - We can do our own development whether we have UB or not.

Resident comment – The story hasn’t changed over the past 2 years. This was a widespread sentiment. The general feeling among those in attendance is that situation has really not changed over time. St. John still intends to sell the property if possible, and the sentiment among those attending was opposition to the sale.

Question: *Can the church’s assets be turned over to outside groups?*

Answer: The townhouses that have already been built and McCarley Gardens are the assets of the church. We have an 84 year history and we are not turning anything over to anyone!

Question: who would be doing the construction for the new townhouses?

6. St. John Baptist Church will do (oversee?) the construction process.
7. *One person at the meeting said they heard that the Jeremiah partnership would have a role, but Reverend Chapman said they will not be involved.*

- My son put in an application for a job but hasn’t heard back, why?

1. *I believe Reverend Chapman said he will look into it.*
2. The entire project is an apprenticeship/workforce development project.
3. Each person who is in the program will have 5 month of training:

- 3 months of education
 - 2 months of “hammer and nail” training
- Confused about the conversations with HUD. Have meetings been held? What are they about?
 1. Any decisions about the future of McCarley will be made in Washington, DC by HUD.
- If McCarley can’t be sold in the near future, why are we here?
 1. Reverend Chapman said that at some point, 2 years from now, it may be looked at and HUD would need recent information.
 2. **Resident Comment** – the McCarley Tenant Association can put this input together and give it to you.
 3. Dr. Taylor added that the Center for Urban Studies job is to make sure that your input is part of the public record – and that the process was fair and real.
- **Resident comment** – Are you sure the 49 townhomes have nothing to do with the sale of McCarley Gardens? It sounds like things are happening “on the quiet”.
- **Resident comment** – Will our concerns actually make a difference? Will they be documented?
- **Resident Comment** – We want to save our homes and we are worried our feedback doesn’t matter.

Question: Has the land McCarley is located on been promised or allotted to anyone/any group?

Answer: No

Question: What if we just fixed McCarley Gardens? If tenants decide they don’t want to be moved, can they rebuild on the site?

Answer: This is not an option because of the \$10M debt on the property (mortgage and rehabilitation).

Question: What is the assessed property value of McCarley?

Resident Comment – The land is valuable

Answer: Reverend Chapman said that St. John worked with the city and identified 35 sites that can accommodate 150 housing units.

- **Resident Question** – Who actually owns the property? Do you have properties in hand?
- **Resident Question** – We heard that the other church was going to develop in that area?
 - The St. John-Fruit Belt CDC has “developer” status in the Fruit Belt.
 - By August 1, 2012, the townhouse project for the first 49 units will be closed on.
- **Resident Comment** – The math seems unclear - \$10M debt and diminishing property value.

Question: What would be involved in moving McCarley Gardens residents?

Answer: 150 McCarley tenants would be moved in three (3) phases, then McCarley Gardens would be taken down piece by piece. A HUD requirement is the one-to-one replacement of units and tenants would get a new unit that would be the same or better than their current unit.

Question: Why, if people are moved, would you choose to move them to the Fruit Belt? Are there any options other than the Fruit Belt?

Answer: The Fruit Belt has one of the lowest crime rates in the City of Buffalo. There is a lot of investment near around the Fruit Belt – in 2 years there will be an additional \$13K (I think it could have been \$13M) in the Medical Campus and \$2 billion in revenue.

- **Resident comment** – If a new development was created, it should still be called McCarley
- **Resident comment** – Residents should have the choice to decide where they are moved.
- **Resident comment** – Concerned with the designation of what counts as the Fruit Belt.

- Target Area for the townhouse project:
 - The boundaries of the area are Main (West), Jefferson (East), Best (North), and North (South).
 - We can put 142 units in this area.
 - Reverend Chapman requested the map of the target area be brought out – which shows the boundaries as well as parcels that are targeted for townhouses.

- Is the cost of construction \$300K per unit? (49 units / \$16M project cost)
 - There will be a mix of 2 – 3 - 4 family units, so you really can't say the cost per unit right now.

Question: Will the townhouses have basements and porches?

Answer: According to New York State, they are not allowed.

Resident comment – Didn't you say before that you can have everything (i.e. basement and porches). Reverend Chapman said that the State Division of Housing and Community Renewal changed the regulations a year ago.

Question: We were told there would be off-street parking? Has that changed?

Answer: No, there will be off-street parking.

Question: Will there be storm doors?

Answer: Yes

Question: Who decided the design of the townhomes already constructed? There was no recorded answer to this question.

Question: Did you lease the church parking lot to any group?

Answer: Yes – to the Buffalo-Niagara medical Campus and to the hotel. The church gets the revenue from this arrangement.

Small Group Issues

At this point of the meeting, the floor was opened up to those who remained to have their issues, concerns, and any assistance they may need in the relocation process documented. It should be noted that some of the people in attendance left at various points during the meeting. Below are the comments that were recorded?

- Where will McCarley residents end up if they are moved?
- Will residents be able to stay in the Fruit Belt?
- What if they do not want to move?
- Don't sell or tear it down – don't give up your homes
- Why is St. John working with the city, given their history?
- The city often leaves a hole in the ground once things are torn down and I do not want to see that.
- There are no health problems with the building conditions of McCarley Gardens.
- UB should build in Kensington Heights, near ECMC.
- There should be historic trust designation for the city – old doesn't mean that it has to go.
- Tired of hearing the same thing over and over.
- There should be access to information and reports for McCarley Garden residents regarding the sale or anything that goes to HUD.
- Trust factor