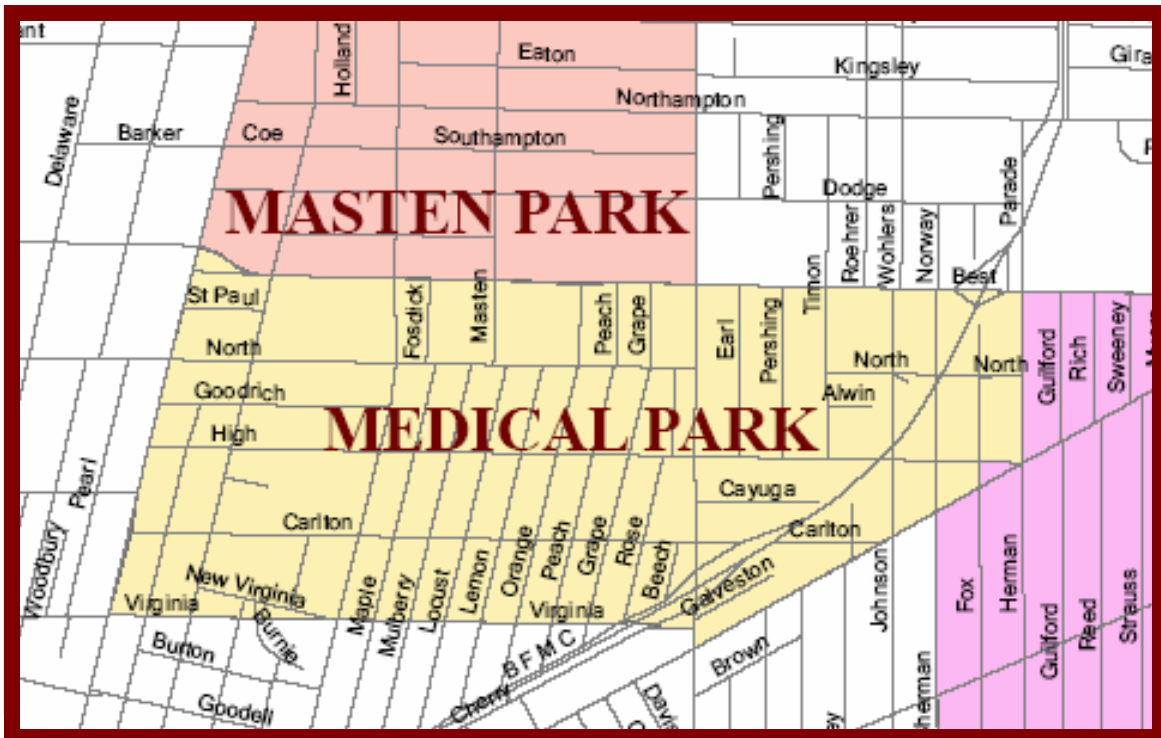


Report

Understanding Residents Concerns Over The St. John Town House Initiative

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A St. John Baptist Church Community Outreach Initiative

June 1, 2006

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The Executive Summary

The St. John townhouse initiative was very disturbing to some of the residents who live in the Fruit Belt. To mediate the tensions stemming from their concerns, Rev. Chapman asked Professor Henry Louis Taylor, Jr., director of the UB Center for Urban Studies, to hold a series of meetings with the concerned residents. The primary purpose was to involve Fruit Belt homeowners, impacted by the proposed townhouse initiative, in a discourse to discover ways to mitigate the potential negative effects of the initiative.

Professor Taylor held four focus group meetings with the residents to gain insight into their concerns and explore ways to resolve them. Focus groups are essentially organized small group discussions designed to gather information about a single topic or narrow range of topics. The focus group met four times, with each session lasting approximately two hours. Eight people participated in each session. Most participants had also attended the neighborhood town meeting where opposition to the townhouse initiative first surfaced.

Findings

The residents had six major concerns:

- 1. The participants did not have input into the decision regarding the location of the townhouses.**
- 2. The building of 13 townhouses increases the likelihood that the Fruit Belt will ever remain a renter-dominated community.**
- 3. The design of the proposed housing units is not consistent with the design and setback of existing housing units.**
- 4. In this initiative, St. John is not targeting the largest market of low-income Buffalonians--including recent high school and college graduates, and downtown and Medical Campus workers--eligible to live in the townhouses.**
- 5. St. John did not consider the viability of other sites in the neighborhood when deciding where to locate the town houses.**
- 6. The Artspace Project appears to be a more exciting project targeted to a broader than the St. John Project, even though they are being financed in the same manner.**

Recommendations

The primary recommendations were:

1. Convene a meeting between Rev. Chapman and participants in the focus group sessions to discuss their concerns, recommendations, and other issues that they might have regarding the townhouse project and future developments in the Fruit Belt.
2. Explore the possibility of siting the townhouses in other locations within the Fruit Belt.
3. Market the townhouse project to a wide range of potential residents, including low-income downtown and medical campus workers.
4. Allow neighborhood residents to participate in the tenant selection process.
5. Develop a strong community participation plan.
6. Hold a series of educational programs to provide residents with an understanding of future development plans in the neighborhood and to acquaint them with the technical aspects of the development process.

In September of 2005, St. John Fruit Belt Development Corporation received state funding to build 28 townhouses on scattered sites in the Fruit Belt. Because low-income tax credits and the housing trust fund will finance the townhouse initiative, St. John decided to market the units to people in the City's rental assistance program. The plan calls for construction of the initial 13 townhouses on the streets closest to the Michigan Avenue.

The St. John townhouse initiative was disturbing to some residents for two reasons. First, they noted that the housing redevelopment strategy announced at the public hearing held at City Hall in the fall of 2004, the project description mentioned only single-family homes. A year later, the **Buffalo News** announced that St. John was launching a townhouse project targeted for the low-income rental market. The residents state that neither St. John nor the City held a public hearing to provide the community with more information about the townhouse project. Secondly, the residents were disturbed that they had no input into the siting of the townhouses. Though they knew the townhouses were to be constructed, they had no idea as to the actual location.

At a community meeting held in early April, many residents voiced their concern. Both Rev. Chapman and Mayor Byron Brown, who attended the meeting, while sympathetic to the resident's concerns, stated that the project would go forward, with or without community support. At the same time, both Rev. Chapman and the mayor said they were willing to make concessions that would lessen the initiative's possible negative effects on the neighborhood. Toward this end, Rev. Chapman asked Professor Henry Louis Taylor, Jr., director of the UB Center for Urban Studies, to work with the residents in search of solutions to this dilemma.

This request led to the emergence of the St. John Community Outreach Initiative. Its primary purpose is to involve Fruit Belt homeowners, impacted by the proposed townhouse initiative, in a discourse to find ways to mitigate the potential negative effects. The objectives are to:

- Provide property owners with an opportunity to voice their concerns
- Make suggestions on ways to mitigate the possible harmful effects of the townhouse project on the neighborhood
- Give recommendations to St. John on ways to more effectively involve residents in future community development initiatives

Method

To find out what residents think about the St. John townhouse initiative and to gain insight into their views on the mitigation of the project's potential negative effects, Professor Taylor held four focus group meetings with the residents. Focus groups work as organized small group discussions designed to gather information about a single topic or narrow range of topics. The goal is to get the ideas, insights, and viewpoints of the participants, rather than to obtain a set of "facts". Thus, the focus group format is one that encourages the free-flow of ideas and comments without attaching positive or negative values to them. "All ideas and comments are great" is the general theme. In this setting, the only bad ideas or comments are the ones that participants do not make.

The focus group met four times. Each session lasted approximately two hours. At the first meeting, a prioritized list of concerns about the townhouse initiative was composed, while the second meeting centered on learning about low-income tax credit housing initiatives. Dr. Robert Silverman, a Senior Research Associate at the Center for Urban Studies and Associate Professor in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, conducted this session.

The third meeting focused on developing a list of prioritized recommendations for the St. John Fruit Belt Development Corporation. A report, written by the consultant, Professor Taylor, summarized the findings of focus group sessions one and three. Each participant received a draft of the report prior to the final focus group session. At this last meeting, the focus group participants reviewed, made comments on, and approved the final report. After every session, the participants reviewed, commented on and approved the notes from the previous meeting. Professor Taylor facilitated all sessions and Frida Ferrer, project manager at the Center for Urban Studies, served as the recorder. The discussions in focus group two and four were not included in this report. These two sessions are germane to the question of concerns and recommendations.

Participants

Eight people participated in the focus group sessions. Most participants had attended the neighborhood town meeting where opposition to the townhouse initiative first surfaced. St. John extended an invitation to these residents to participate in the focus groups. Those residents attending the first focus group session, in turn, invited others to participate (Appendix A). All focus group participants were homeowners whose property was either located adjacent to or near one of the proposed townhouse units. Most participants attended all meetings. All participants, however, reviewed, commented on, and approved the final report. Consequently, the ideas expressed in this report, represent the views of all eight participants in the focus group sessions.

Findings

Focus Group Session One:

The first session focused on gathering information and gaining insight into the issues that concerned residents about the townhouse initiative. Six themes emerged in this meeting.

Themes

1. St. John's vision of the neighborhood is different from the resident's vision of the community.

For example, the participants want the Fruit Belt to become a community where the owner-occupied, single-family housing unit dominates and where people from across the race and income spectrum live. They believe that St. John wants the Fruit Belt to become a community that low-income renters dominate and where doubles and clusters of multi-family housing units characterize the housing units.

2. The residents did not have a voice in the development of the townhouse initiative.

St. John did provide residents with information about the initiative, but the church did not provide them an opportunity to have input. For example, the residents knew about the initiative, but had no voice in the architectural design of units or in the siting of the townhouses.

3. St. John never gave residents little information about the townhouse initiative.

The numerous questions participants had about the project reflected this concern. For example, what flexibility does St. John have in marketing the townhouses? Does St. John have to consider only people in the rental assistance program? How did St. John determine what lots on which to build the townhouses? Is the architectural design of the proposed units compatible with the design of the existing housing units? Who will manage those units once they became owner-occupied? This is a problematic issue because the town house units are doubles. Thus, for example, what happens if one owner wants to make repairs that the other owner cannot afford?

4. The participants want a voice in shaping the townhouse initiative.

Even though St. John plans to proceed with the project, with or without community support, the participants nevertheless want to have a *real voice* in shaping the initiative. By *real voice*, they mean that St. John should act on their principle recommendations.

5. St. John is insensitive to the possible negative impact that the townhouse development might have on the values of the homes of residents.

St. John often discusses the church's investment in the community, but rarely, if ever, does the church acknowledge that the homeowners are also investing in the Fruit Belt. Their risk is considerable. If housing values fall in the Fruit Belt, or residents cannot sell their house, their personal savings are jeopardized. Therefore, the residents should have a voice in the development of the Fruit Belt, even if St. John leads that developmental process.

6. The participants are not opposed to either the building of townhouses or the redevelopment of the Fruit Belt.

They simply want to participate in deciding what happens in their community.

Concerns

The participants rank-ordered their concerns and placed them in three categories, high-concern, moderate-concern, and low-concern, to give the St. John Fruit Belt Development Corporation greater insight into their issues.

High-Concern

1. The participants did not have input into the siting of the townhouses. It is not enough to provide them with information about the project, they should also have input into decisions on where the housing units will be located.

- a. St. John has held meetings with the residents, but these gatherings have been to provide them with information rather than elicit input into the project. The participants want to their own ideas to play a role in shaping the project.
 - b. Community residents who are not members of The St. John Church are not members of the St. John Community Development Corporation. This means that non-St. John members, who live in the Fruit Belt, do not have a voice in the decision-making process that is shaping their community.
 - c. The participants are deeply concerned about the communication system St. John uses to interact with residents. They feel this system is deeply flawed and needs fixing.
2. The building of 13 townhouses will increase significantly the number of rental units over owner-occupied units. This increases the concern that the Fruit Belt will remain a renter-dominated community. This is problematic because the participants want their community dominated by homeowners.
 3. The design of the proposed housing units is not consistent with the design and setback of existing housing units. This mismatch between housing designs will diminish the visual appeal of the neighborhood and negatively effect the community's desirability.
 4. St. John is not going to market the townhouses to the broadest range of low-income Buffalonians, including recent high school and college graduates, and downtown and Medical Campus workers. St. John should market the housing units to people other than those on rental assistance.
 5. The Artspace Project is attempting to capture a more viable low-income population than St. John does. Something appears to be missing from the Fruit Belt townhouse project that is present in the Artspace project.
 6. St. John did not consider the viability of other sites when deciding where to locate the town houses. The strategy of building outward from Michigan Avenue is a good one. This appears to be the highest priced land in the Fruit Belt; therefore, it seems to be the prime location for more expensive housing units. Thus, the locating of low-income rental units in this part of the neighborhood may not be a good idea.

Moderate-Concerns

1. The management company may not do a good job screening the tenants. The residents do not know what criteria the management company will use in rejecting or accepting residents. For example, will the criteria be exclusively economic or will they use other criteria as well?
2. The residents do not understand the process by which tenants will eventually become owners. Is St. John's planning to convert all the townhouses to owner-occupancy, or just a few?
3. There have been no social, transportation, or environmental impact studies of the project. The earlier impact studies dealt with housing values and population increases.
4. The townhouses will lead to an increase in the number of children living in the community, and this will lead to problems, such as excessive noise, property

damage, and theft. The increase in children, particularly youth, will bolster the perception and reality of increased crime.

Low-Concerns

1. How does one acquire ownership of vacant lots, located adjacent to their homes?
2. What are the economics of the townhouse project? Are public dollars largely responsible for financing the project? If this is true, then residents should have a voice in decision-making. Is public participation mandatory in projects that are funded with state and federal dollars?
3. What happens to the revenue generated by the project? If this is a public project, will the profits finance quality of life improvements in the neighborhood? What type of partnership exists between St. John and City Hall? As the designated developer of the Fruit Belt, what powers and responsibilities, does St. John possess?
4. Can residents use vehicles like community land trusts to acquire a greater voice in and control over Fruit Belt development?

Focus Group Session Two:

The second session focused on developing a set of recommendations to mitigate potential problems with the townhouse development initiative and to formulate a strategy to incorporate residents meaningfully in the shaping of initiatives in future redevelopment projects in the Fruit Belt.

The recommendations evolved around three interactive themes.

- 1. Improving the townhouse initiative**
- 2. Enhancing the tenant selection process and integrating newcomers into the community**
- 3. Bolstering community participation**

Recommendations

A. Improving the Townhouse Initiative

1. **Explore the possibility of siting townhouses in other locations within the Fruit Belt.**

No more than one townhouse should be located on any give street, nor should they be overrepresented in any part of the community. Within this context, there are two complimentary principles that should guide the siting of the townhouses. First, St. John could cluster the townhouses on streets that contain large numbers of vacant lots. Second, St. John should site the townhouses the greatest distance from Michigan Avenue, preferably along Orange, Peach, Grape, and Rose. The reason is that the highest value residential land will be closest to the Medical Campus. Therefore, St. John should reserve Maple, Mulberry, and Locust for single-family and/or high-end rental development.

2. **Do not build townhouses adjacent to homeowners that object to siting them at that location.**

Some homeowners in the Fruit Belt do not object to having townhouses built adjacent to their property. St. John should identify these homeowners and build the townhouses next to them.

3. **Market the townhouse to a wide range of potential residents, including low-income downtown and medical campus workers.**
4. **Provide residents with the opportunity to review and approve the design of housing units before finalizing the designs.**

B. Enhancing the Tenant Selection Process and Integrating Newcomers into the Neighborhood

1. **Residents should be able to participate in the tenant selection process.**
2. **Give all tenants moving into the townhouses homeownership training.**
3. **Explain to residents the process by which townhouse tenants may become owners.**
4. **Develop a maintenance plan for townhouses when they become owner occupied.**
5. **Work with neighborhood residents to develop a system of monitoring the townhouses to keep maintenance at a high level and to solve problems quickly.**
6. **Work with other Fruit Belt organizations to develop after school programs to facilitate the incorporation of new children and youth into the neighborhood.**
7. **Work with residents living on streets where the townhouses are located to develop plans for incorporating the townhouse residents into the neighborhood.**

C. Bolstering Community Participation

- 1. Develop a strong community participation plan so that residents will be involved in future initiatives.**

The plan should have strong outreach components with multiple strategies for letting residents know about neighborhood development plans and for getting their input on them.

- 2. Hold a series of educational programs to provide residents with an understanding of future development plans in the neighborhood and to acquaint them with the technical aspects of the development process.**

For example, there should be a workshop on low-income tax credit developments, especially on the Qualified Allocation Plan for NY. Residents should understand the constraints under which the St. John Development Corporation is operating. The Development Corporation should explain the economics of housing development to residents, along with how the corporation makes decisions regarding siting projects. Rather than holding a one-time meeting, a sequence of workshops that cover a variety of topics would be more beneficial.

- 3. Appoint neighborhood residents, who are not members of St. John, to the St. John Development Corporation.**

While St. John is taking considerable risks in undertaking this project, homeowners in the community are taking risks as well. They made a considerable investment in purchasing homes in the Fruit Belt, and the success or failure of the project will directly affect the value of their property. Therefore, homeowners should have input into the Fruit Belt development process.

From these ten recommendations, the participants selected the six most important ones.

Primary Recommendations

- 1. Hold a meeting between Rev. Chapman and participants in the focus group sessions to discuss their concerns, recommendations, and other issues that they might have regarding the townhouse project and future developments in the Fruit Belt.**
- 2. Explore the possibility of siting the townhouse in other locations within the Fruit Belt.**
- 3. Market the townhouse to a wide range of potential residents, including low-income downtown and medical campus workers.**
- 4. Allow neighborhood residents to participate in the tenant selection process.**

5. **Develop a strong community participation plan. Hold a series of educational program to provide residents with an understanding of future development plans in the neighborhood and to acquaint them with the technical aspects of the development process.**

Appendix A

Participants in the Focus Groups The Townhouse Project Issue

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