



Roland Park might ask city for historic district status

Move could help community dictate terms of development

By Adam Bednar

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Roland Park is considering applying for designation as a Baltimore City historic district.

Such a designation would help protect the community from development and could impact plans by Keswick Multi-Care Center to build a controversial retirement center.

Roland Park appears to meet the requirements for historic status, said Tyler Gearhart, chairman of the Baltimore Commission for Historical & Architectural Preservation board, known as CHAP.

The neighborhood lends itself to designation because of its significance historically as the first planned community designed by the Olmsted brothers, said Gearhart, a Roland Park resident.

Already-designated landmarks, including the Roland Park Water Tower and the Roland Park Shopping Center, also would make Roland Park a good candidate, Gearhart told the Roland Park Civic League on Dec. 4.

Roland Park would be only the third community in the Messenger's coverage area to gain historic status through CHAP. The other two are Mt. Washington and Waverly.

Roland Park is on the National Register of Historical Places, but that only provides tax breaks, not protection to structures in the neighborhood.

City historic status would prevent property owners from making any exterior changes to a property unless they are deemed to conform to the historic nature of the community.

For example, a homeowner could not put vinyl siding on a house when the rest of the homes in the immediate area are cedar shake. Any exterior changes would have to be approved by the CHAP board.

Historic district restrictions would even trump Roland Park's restrictive covenants and would help the neighborhood put restrictions back on the 30 percent of houses whose covenants have expired.

Although the historic designation would not supersede existing zoning codes, it would allow the neighborhood to dictate the design and materials used in any development in the district, Gearhart said.

"You (would) even have the authority to tell the city what it could build," he said.

To have the neighborhood designated as a city historic district, the civic league would have to apply to CHAP. The board then would hold a public meeting to tell residents what to expect if the neighborhood won the designation.

CHAP would mail survey cards to all property owners in the proposed district asking if they support becoming a historic district. If most said yes, a CHAP board hearing would follow.

"The issue would be, is there really, truly support?" Gearhart said.

If the CHAP board approves the designation, it would still have to be approved by the city Planning Commission and, ultimately, the City Council.

Although historic designation could affect how a retirement center is built, that project has no bearing on the league's interest in becoming a historic district, league president Philip Spevak said.

"I see these as two separate things," Spevak said.

Keswick is planning to build a 323-bed retirement community on 17 acres of undeveloped land now owned by the Baltimore Country Club at Falls Road and Hillside Avenue.

Spevak said the league has been so focused on trying to prevent development of the country club land that officials were afraid the CHAP process would be a distraction.

"We hesitated to have this conversation tonight (about historic designation) because we were afraid to lose concentration on Keswick," he said of the Dec. 4 meeting.

He also said that the process of becoming a historic district would take longer than it will take to resolve issues with Keswick and the country club, which agreed to sell the land to Keswick over the community's objections.

The league hopes to convince the club to sell the land to the league instead, so it can be maintained as green space.

"We're well on our way to buying the land and creating a community space," Spevak said with a smile.

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