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Feb 19, 2010

[Neighbors fighting Roland Park Place plan to demolish a church for parking](#)



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Roland Park Place would like to demolish this former church to expand parking. (Photo by Fern Shen)

by FERN SHEN

Another old unloved church facing the wrecking ball. Another north Baltimore extended-care facility is clashing with neighbors.

This time, it's Roland Park Place, the retirement community on 40th Street with a desire to expand its parking by knocking down a church and making other changes. And the neighborhood that's fighting back, in an effort to assert its identity, is Rolden.

Rolden? The name comes from the two adjacent communities, Roland Park and Hampden.

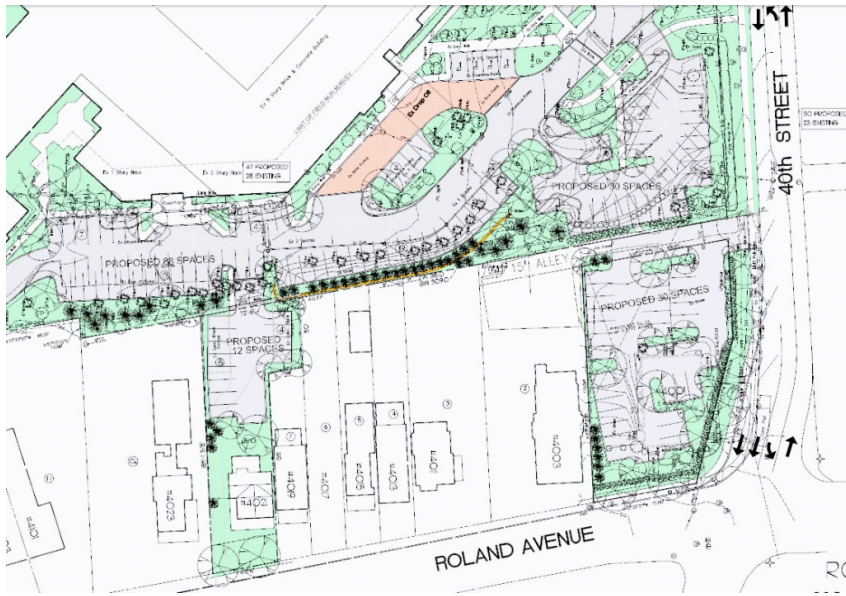
Hey, they could have chosen *Hamrol*, which sounds more like some odd luncheon meat, residents point out.

Rolden residents may have a sense of humor about their name, but they are quite serious about opposing Roland Park Place's parking expansion plan, which they say would threaten the residential quality of their community.

"We're trying to hold our ground and keep it more residential," said Tracy Collins. After months of letters and meetings, the two sides have reached a frosty impasse.

Rolden is basically a group of about 100 households and a couple of businesses that occupy the 4000 block of Roland, between 40th Street and University Parkway.

Roland Park Place is proposing to knock down the century-old church building at the southern end of this block (at the corner of Roland and 40th) and put 30 parking spots there. They also want to put 12 parking spaces behind a house they acquired further up the block, 4021 Roland.



Roland Park Place plan for expanded parking. [Click to enlarge.](#)

Their initial proposal would have meant knocking down the house at 4021 as well, but RPP dropped that idea when residents howled.

"Having a parking lot punched into the middle of the block would be like losing a tooth," Collins said. "The residents were quite definite about that."



Intersection Roland Avenue and 40th Street. (Photo by Fern Shen)

Even limited to the area behind the house, parking at 4021 would be a nuisance to neighbors, Collins argues. “It’s a 24-hour facility, so people could be in the lot at all hours, talking, having car alarms go off.”

The church, a former Episcopal church built in 1889 and purchased by Roland Park Place in 2001, hasn’t had a congregation in years, but residents prefer even this vacant stone building and its lawn to a patch of asphalt, Collins said.

“There are lots of [churches](#) like that on corners in Baltimore,” she said. “How many of the neighbors would want to see them become parking lots?”

Parking spaces at a premium

In [talks with Rolden and the Roland Park Civic League](#) (both groups are on record opposing RPP’s plans), the retirement community has laid out its problem pretty clearly. Their parking needs have increased, they say, as a result of a fitness and aquatic center they built in 2002 which required more employees.

Meanwhile, their available parking is going to decrease. They lease 40 parking spaces on the back lot of the nearby Rotunda shopping center and 15 spaces on Elm Street. They’ll lose these 55 spaces whenever construction begins on new buildings planned by the Rotunda’s owners.

RPP’s proposed new parking along Roland Avenue would give them 42 badly-needed spaces, they say.

Like Keswick Multi-Care Center, their next-door neighbor on 40th Street which clashed with the Roland Park community over their proposal to build at the site of the Baltimore Country Club, RPP argues that the population is aging and communities need places for their elderly.

Community's character debated

Rolden-ites worry that the parking lots will set a bad precedent, pushing the area more toward retail and commercial uses.

In recent years, she said, younger couples, singles and families have moved in, giving the area a new energy and diversity. Collins says her neighbors include “attorneys, a couple of professors, somebody with a construction business and a nurse.”

“We’ve been here 5 years. I grew up in Baltimore, left and came back,” said Collins. “We’ve liked this area! It’s so convenient. I’ve liked being able to put the baby in a stroller and walk to the grocery store. And not having to drive so much.” The Elmhurst Nursery School, on this block, is another draw, she said.



Dry cleaners and consignment store on Roland across from church



Roland Park Wines and Liquors

Roland Park Place, meanwhile, argues that Rolden is romanticizing when it says the church “anchors the beauty and character of the neighborhood.”

“Any driver or pedestrian approaching the intersection, one corner of which houses the church, must also see the laundry, the sushi bar, and the beauty parlor which occupy the remaining three corners,” RPP residents wrote, in a November letter to Rolden.

Of the church, they said:

“It is obvious from its present decayed appearance that little attention was given to the upkeep of the church prior to RPP’s purchase of the property. Yet ROLDEN now claims that the church is ‘ours,’ further espousing its history and appearance.”

Ouch.

They even argue that their parking lots would improve the neighborhood, creating ““in lieu of an abandoned and deteriorating church, an attractively landscaped parking area.”

The Rolden Community Association last week sent out an email urging neighboring communities to support them and write to City Council members to oppose RPP’s plan. Collins is still hopeful that RPP will consider some of the alternatives Rolden has suggested to help them with their parking problems, including leasing spaces from the Hopkins at the newly-purchased Zurish building nearby.

Collins says Rolden was not “arm-twisted” by the Roland Park Civic League, as some have suggested, but really wanted to improve quality of life for the odd little piece of Baltimore they have grown to love.


“Others may not like our neighborhood or think much of it,” she said, “but we really like it a lot.”

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9 Responses

1.  *Michael Hill* says:
[February 19, 2010 at 2:09 pm](#)


As a resident of this corner from 1978-1992, I read this piece with interest. The community association had just been formed — and come up with the Rolden name (I preferred Hampden Heights 😊) — when I moved in specifically to deal with Roland Park Place which was then being planned on the former site of Roland Park Country School (which had burned). Initial plans called for one of the RPP buildings to run along its property line, looming over the backyards of houses on the east side of Roland Ave. After negotiations, the buildings were re-sited and everyone was pretty happy. Seems to me there’s some sort of similar solution here, that RPP can have a lot of parking behind the church and rehab the building itself into a some sort of facility RPP can use, and perhaps even the community can, too. That would include the residents of the much lower-cost senior facility across 40th St. But that solution would mean that the RPP people are sincere in their stated desire to serve the city’s aging population and not just those affluent enough to enjoy their high-priced offering.

2.  *Editor* says:
[February 19, 2010 at 2:42 pm](#)

Thanks for your comment, Mike! Here's something I should have mentioned in my piece that I saw in RPP's 1/25/10 letter. They say they wanted to rehab the building but an architect told them "the cost of rehabilitating this deteriorating building was prohibitive."

3.  *tompelton* says:
[February 19, 2010 at 9:54 pm](#)


The last thing this neighborhood needs is more parking lots. Buildings like that old church make Baltimore what it is — historic, unique, cool. If Roland Park Place needs more parking, it should move its whole operation out to the exurbs, where more parking lots would blend it nicely with the landscape of blacktop and sterility.

4.  *Nate Payer* says:
[February 21, 2010 at 12:25 pm](#)


So there's no room to create structured parking? I think they need to bite the bullet and pay for a parking structure. In the long run, this will afford them more opportunity to expand their operations within their current footprint.

Generally structured parking becomes more economical as land prices approach \$1 million per acre. Within constrained campus settings, the opportunity cost of land will usually justify structured parking than in an unconstrained urban environment.

My cursory glance at the aerial layout suggests there's space to do it without impacting the community too much. But I don't know. So what's the deal?

5.  *John* says:
[February 22, 2010 at 3:55 pm](#)

FYI, if I recall correctly the abandoned church on the northeast corner of Roland and 40th was Methodist. The old Episcopal church is on the southwest side of the intersection and today serves as a community outreach center.

6.  *Editor* says:
[February 22, 2010 at 4:50 pm](#)

Thanks, John, we need more details about the church and its history and would love some help on this from Brew readers.....

7.  *Michael Hill* says:

[February 22, 2010 at 5:42 pm](#)

My memory agrees with John, that it was a Methodist church, that the Episcopalian one is tucked in a bit away from the street on the southwest side, beside the cemetery. This church that's facing demolition was active certainly into the late '80s, probably into the '90s.

When I lived across the street, I always referred to that stretch of Roland Ave. as the demilitarized zone between Roland Park and Hampden. Since then, I think those two neighborhoods have ceased most, though not all, hostilities.



8. *Fritz* says:

[February 22, 2010 at 11:58 pm](#)

Nate, the price of land is irrelevant if they are allowed to build the parking lot since they own the new land. Building on unused land you own is always cheaper than parking structures.

Here are the reasons I can think of for opposing

- * A (relatively) pretty Church gets replaced with asphalt.
- * Baltimore has an consent decree against it from EPA / MD Department of the Environment for combined sewer overflows. We need more permeable surfaces not more impenetrable ones.
- * Community dislike of the project—while local interest should not solely decide the fate of any project, it should not be ignored.
- * I thought part of the city's plan was to reduce car dependence? Building parking does not do that.

I like the urban form and for me this is primarily a land use issue and secondarily a preservation issue. The lot expansion should fail first and foremost because of those concerns and secondarily because of preservation.



9. *Nate Payer* says:

[February 23, 2010 at 10:36 am](#)

Fritz, I support the reasons you list. My point was that campus owners/managers tend to ignore the fact that they already own a property and dismiss it's opportunity cost and it's value if they were to sell it. For example, selling the land of the church to a rehaber might yield enough money to finance structured parking elsewhere on their property, ideally.

However, admittedly, under the scenario I've outlined above, if rehabbing the church is truly uneconomical, the best scenario would be demolition of the church and replaced with another productive structure, but at least no parking lot.

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