

Real Estate

Roland Park residents rail against Keswick plan

Plan to build eldercare facility near green space draws heated protests

ROBBIE WHELAN
 Daily Record Business Writer
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Dozens of lawn signs bearing anti-development slogans dot the median that runs down the middle of Roland Avenue outside of Roland Park Elementary and Middle School: "Save the Park in Roland Park," and "No PUD! No Rezoning!"

These and other banners, as well as hundreds of area residents wearing bright yellow "Neighborhoods Matter" T-shirts printed by the Roland Park Civic League, comprised the scene that greeted officials from Keswick Multi-Care — a Baltimore-based nonprofit that is seeking to buy 17 acres of green space from the Baltimore Country Club and build a 300-unit eldercare facility — as they arrived at a community meeting Tuesday night.

Keswick CEO Libby Bowerman said Tuesday afternoon, before the meeting, that the gathering was her company's first chance to present its \$200 million plan to the community, and she looked forward to a "good dialogue."

But by the end of the meeting, which lasted more than three hours in the school's overheated auditorium, Bowerman appeared tired and disheartened.

"I am woefully and sorrowfully disappointed in this meeting for one reason," she told what remained of the 500-plus in attendance. "You are still unwilling to talk to us. ... We can't [have a discussion] if you continue to shoot us down."

Keswick announced plans to pay \$12.5 million for 17 of the country club's 33 acres along Falls Road, at the western edge of Roland Park, in June. The contract is contingent on the approval of an ordinance to change the land's zoning restrictions called a Planned Unit Development, or PUD, by Baltimore's City Council.

But the prospect of changing the club land's R-1 zoning, which allows only for single-family detached homes, religious institutions, recreational facilities and schools, has riled the surrounding community, which mobilized quickly, putting up hundreds of signs and organizing protests.

Protesters have voiced concerns over the amount of traffic the proposed development would generate, the loss of green space, infrastructure concerns and the proposal's perceived incongruence with the vision of Roland Park's original planners, the Olmsted brothers, who built the community from scratch in 1894.

"The community ... is very overwhelmingly opposed to turning this green space into a more high density development than the zoning would permit," said Del. Sandy Rosenberg, whose 41st District includes Roland Park. "There aren't many green spaces like this in the city, and we should preserve them."

Leading the charge against Keswick's plan is the Roland Park Civic League, a neighborhood association that wants to buy the land, but which has yet to come up with viable funding sources or a fair market offer, according to Baltimore Country Club board members.

"We're bound by a contract [to Keswick]," said BCC President John L. Daue.

Members of the BCC circulated a letter directed to the RPCL outlining a timeline of meetings that occurred in 2007 and earlier this year between the club, and the RPCL and Ken Rice of the Roland Park Foundation, which indicated that all proposed sales of the land had been discussed with them, and that no offer to buy the land had been received from either organization.

But at Tuesday's meeting, Rice, speaking from the podium, denounced the letter, calling it "a bunch of lies," and stated that proposals from his organization to buy the land had been ignored.

Over about 40 minutes, representatives of Keswick, including traffic planners and independent consultants, as well as Bowerman, presented a plan that they said conserves 75 percent of the BCC's green space and will result in "zero traffic impact." Slides showing overhead schematics of the site showed 3½-story buildings built to resemble Roland Park's existing architecture, with gardens interspersed.

Rice and other community officials countered with more than 90 minutes of presentations, comparing the scale of the development to M&T Bank Stadium and arguing that Keswick's traffic analysis was incomplete because



Roland Park Civic League President Phil Spevak, left, and Al Barry, development consultant for Keswick Multi-Care at a Tuesday night meeting between Keswick and members of the Roland Park community.

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it had only studied two nearby intersections, not including where Falls Road crosses Northern Parkway. Community members also showed a short film with interviews from local residents and activists who opposed the plan.

Civic League President Phillip Spevak emphasized the community's opposition to the Keswick plan, and several plans for putting public open space, a pool or other recreational facilities on the site were presented.

"I don't want there to be any ambiguity that the community and the Civic League want to buy the property," Spevak said. Another slide proposed financing sources including community funds and foundational money that might be leveraged to offer BCC \$12.2 million for the property.

Del. Rosenberg confirmed Tuesday that he, along with Del. Nathaniel T. Oaks and state Sen. Lisa A. Gladden, are drafting legislation to be introduced in the next legislative session that would stop the development. Pressed for details, Rosenberg declined to comment, saying he "[doesn't] draft bills in public."

Numerous other local politicians spoke out in opposition to Keswick's plan, including Councilwoman Sharon Green Middleton, who vowed not to introduce any legislation that would change the zoning on the BCC's land. She said she had the support of all of her colleagues on the Baltimore City Council, including Council President Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, who confirmed Wednesday that she would not support a PUD over objections from Middleton.

The tone of the debate was mostly cordial, apart from a few boos in response to Daue's comments. Tempers got heated, however, during a question-and-answer session afterwards.

Developer John Voneiff, who lives in the nearby neighborhood of Blythewood, appeared enraged as he accused the audience of not giving the Keswick proposal a chance and discriminating against the elderly. "I'm very angry with what I've heard here tonight, because this is a stacked bunch," he said.

After being shouted down by the audience, Voneiff threw the microphone at Anne Stuzin, the editor of the local newsletter Roland Park News and a volunteer helping moderate the question session, and stormed out.

"That was one BCC member to another, and two very different perspectives," she later said.

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