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## **Keep it green**

### **Country club land slated for development is open space the city needs**

By Ann Klassen

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On my street I have many neighbors, but in recent days my attention has been focused on two who are not people. They are large tracts of trees and fields, set aside long ago to offer city dwellers green space for recreation, enjoyment and health. Last Tuesday's *Sun* brought me photos of both my neighbors, in typical poses. One photo showed a man enjoying the sunny weather by batting a tennis ball against a faded cement wall; the second featured a businesswoman by a high chain-link fence, behind which stretched trees, open fields, and a stream.

My first neighbor's official function is as a high school — Baltimore Polytechnic Institute — but like the Statue of Liberty, it welcomes everyone, yearning to ... hold a track meet, softball game or even a three-day reggae festival, play tennis, jog, or fly kites. It gets worn out by all those who love and use it. I sometimes wonder how long before it is ruined, how much longer our overburdened school system can serve as a de facto parks department, responding to overflowing trash cans and broken tennis nets - caused not by students but by all its neighbors who could really use a park, but are glad for this rundown but welcoming open space.

The second, the rolling back yard of the Baltimore Country Club, provides me with a beautiful vista to look at but no opportunities for use. It is private space, surrounded by tall fences and locked gates, a pristinely maintained landscape owned by 2,900 "neighbors" I have never met. We used to see them often, but several years ago they began to stay in the county and stopped using their lovely city green space at all.

These neighbors have recently announced publicly what they have demonstrated privately - that they own more land than they can use. Belying their nonprofit status, they will sell 17 "surplus" acres for 2 1/2 times the tax-assessed value of their entire 30 acre city parcel, although they will keep their elegant walnut-paneled buildings, squash and paddle tennis courts, and parking lots. Their buyers, the Keswick Multi-Care Center, will ask the city to ignore the residential zoning on this large green space, and destroy the fields, streams and woods to build six multistory buildings, underground garages and service roads. Our new neighbors will create a privately owned, self-described "high-end" mini-city, behind fences and gates, for hundreds of folks fortunate enough to be able to pay handsomely to secure the many medical and personal services needed late in life. Day and night, we will hear ambulance sirens and delivery trucks, and look out at tall buildings instead of trees.

Baltimore's population has shrunk, and vast tracts of residential and commercial space lie abandoned. Our remaining green space is essential to our future as a city. It buffers us from highways and traffic, improves our notoriously poor air quality, provides free and accessible recreational space to help combat chronic disease among residents lacking private opportunities, and maintains the city's quality of life by attracting home buyers and a healthy tax base for our schools and public services. We use scarce tax dollars to replant and re-green our city, even as we allow developers to destroy existing green.

No private need, no matter how well intentioned, should be allowed to destroy green space that, once lost, will never be regained. Green space, like the clean air it produces, is a resource none of us is too wealthy, or too poor, to need. A livable city comes at a cost — perhaps forgoing the most lucrative land sale, or reusing an existing site rather than having pristine fields on which to build.

Schools should not substitute for public recreational space that is carefully designed, managed and maintained. The Baltimore Greenway initiative, started with such promise, still lacks its central Baltimore connection to Lake Roland north of the city. Tax credits, land use swaps, and other creative planning options should be thoroughly explored by the city, county and state environmentalists and planners, to offer fair compensation to the current nonprofit organization owning the land, and allow the citizens of Baltimore to find the best public use of this important green space.

A designer of Roland Park, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., is the son of the man most famous for the “public jewel” he created in New York City: Central Park. North Baltimore could use a Central Park, and we should work together to take advantage of this opportunity to create one before it is gone.

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