

No hard feelings: Roland Park makes new offer

Potential financier discussing purchase of country club land

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Posted 5/27/09

The 'No Keswick' signs are down, the ill will has dissipated and the Roland Park Civic League has made a new offer to purchase 17.5 acres of Baltimore Country Club land -- with a potential financier involved in early discussions.

Civic League President Phil Spevak announced the "encouraging news" at the league's annual meeting May 20, and State Del. Sandy Rosenberg said afterwards that he would push for state funding to help the league buy the property if needed.

Spevak said the league has not offered a dollar amount, but has proposed getting an appraisal of the property.

He also said that Jack Dwyer, owner of the Bare Hills-based Capital Funding Group, a club member and a Roland Park resident, is involved in early discussions. Dwyer could not be reached for comment.

The Baltimore Sun reported in April that Capital Funding Group is planning to acquire Towson-based AmericasBank Corp.

Spevak said he has not asked Dwyer for financial backing but that Dwyer is respected by both the club and the league.

Spevak said that for the first time the club appears to be taking the league seriously, based on a conversation he had with John Daue, the club's president, May 7.

"I felt there was a feeling of mutual respect. This is the first time we've presented an offer and they've acknowledged it," Spevak said.

The league offered \$4.1 million in the early 1990s, one of several offers the club has made, but the club didn't respond to any of those offers.

He said he thinks the club thought the league lacked "financial credibility."

Last summer, the club's membership voted overwhelmingly to accept Keswick Multi-Care Center's offer of \$12.5 million to purchase the property for use as a retirement community with 343 beds and underground parking. Just as overwhelmingly residents rose up with signs in yards to fight the sale and proposed use.

Several city and state elected officials also publicly opposed it. City Council member Sharon Green Middleton and council President Stephanie Rawlings-Blake flatly refused to support a planned unit development needed for the project.

The battle left feelings so raw that Spevak remembers the exact date and time that Keswick CEO Libby Bowerman told him Keswick was backing out of the deal -- Friday the 13th in March at 1:50 p.m.

Last Wednesday, Middleton and a representative of Rawlings-Blake's office were in a surprisingly large audience of nearly 200 people at the annual league meeting. Spevak attributed the size of the crowd at Roland Park Elementary/Middle School not only to the appearance of city public schools Chief Executive Officer Andres Alonso, but also to the jolt that the fight with Keswick gave the community.

"This is a sleepy meeting sometimes," Spevak said. "The Keswick thing really turned people on."

But he said even in the heat of battle, the community was looking ahead to try to get the club to sell the land to the league. Now, those negotiations have begun, he said.

"We have proposed to the club that one way to navigate to a (property) price is to get an appraisal," he said. "Small groups on both sides have agreed to keep meeting."

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