

Fundraising buys time to save land

Roland Park Civic League intensifies efforts to buy proposed Keswick retirement center site

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Effort intensifies in Roland Park

Raising money to buy the Baltimore Country Club land in Roland Park wouldn't be a problem for the neighborhood, at least one resident says.

David Tufaro, a former director of the Roland Park Foundation, said the neighborhood could raise \$5.5 million to \$14 million for the land.

The money would come from a mix of private donations, land trusts and public funds, he said.

However, the \$14 million figure is extremely high and probably more than a developer would pay, said Tufaro, a developer.

The neighborhood has made three previous offers for the land, but those offers were ignored, Tufaro said. The foundation offered \$4.2 million in 1999, 2001 and 2003, he said.

The city has assessed the 32-acre site at \$1.99 million, Tufaro said at a community "roundtable" meeting Sept. 21 at the home of Claudia Diamond. The roundtable was one of several organized by the Roland Park Civic League that were held in homes last week and this week.

Phil Spevak, president of the Roland Park Civic League, said the meetings have been extremely well-attended. Nearly 32 people crammed into one house on Sept. 18, and about 20 attended the one at Diamond's house Sept. 21, even though it conflicted with a Baltimore Ravens football game.

The civic league is trying to stop Keswick Multi-Care Center in Hampden from building a retirement community on 17 acres of the club's land at Falls and Hillside roads.

Keswick agreed to buy the property for \$12.5 million this summer -- contingent on a planned unit development being approved by the city.

The land is zoned for residential use, which would preclude the retirement center if a PUD amendment is not approved.

Resident Lynn Heller said allowing the PUD could open the neighborhood up to other development.

"What ought to be at stake for us as a broader community is the rezoning," she said.

Tufaro and Heller also discussed alternative plans for the land. Plans developed by the civic league would leave most of the land unchanged.

The only big change could involve restoring the tennis courts on the property. Moving the neighborhood's pool to that area was also discussed.

The sale of the land has galvanized the neighborhood in opposition to the loss of the prized green space. When the sale was announced in July, about 400 people attended a community meeting at St. David's Episcopal Church.

Throughout the community, signs protesting the sale are placed in front yards. Civic league membership has increased since the sale was announced.

At a public meeting with Baltimore Mayor Sheila Dixon this summer, hundreds of area residents attended to protest the land sale.

The issue has gained national attention because of the history of the neighborhood and the land, and was the subject of a recent story in The New York Times.

Roland Park was the first designed community in the United States, and was designed by the famed urban planner Frederick Law Olmsted.

The club land also is steeped in history. The land, initially the club's golf course, was host to the fifth U.S. Open in 1899.

After the meeting, Tufaro said the neighbors aren't mad at Keswick, but blame the country club for the situation.

"The country club misled them in a sense," Tufaro said. "Keswick wasn't aware of the firestorm they'd find themselves in when they bought this property."

He said his and Heller's presentation was subjective, but those in favor of the project will get a chance to present their side of the story.

Keswick will formally present its plans at a meeting at Roland Park Elementary School on Oct. 14 at 7 p.m.

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