

Citizens: What should Roland Park become?

Meeting launches creation of master plan

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Should Roland Park be a special benefits district? Should it seek city designation as an historic neighborhood?

How can the neighborhood reduce traffic congestion along Roland Avenue on school days, help its seniors age in place, protect green space and promote the business community?

A public meeting raised more questions than answers, but that was the point as Roland Park residents gathered Nov. 21 to begin drafting a master plan for the community.

"Be creative," Phil Spevak, president of the Roland Park Civic League, told 100 people who came to Roland Park Elementary/Middle School for the first of three scheduled charettes, or brainstorming sessions, in coming months. "Let's try to dream about what can happen."

Piggybacking on Baltimore City's comprehensive rezoning process, the league hopes to present its own master plan to the city by June of 2010, largely as a way to set the agenda on traffic and development issues.

City planning department officials, several of whom live in Roland Park, are actively helping the league, and two city council members who represent the neighborhood, Mary Pat Clarke and Sharon Green Middleton, made a point of attending the meeting.

Attendees at the Saturday charette broke into eight groups to discuss themes including housing, transportation, future development, infrastructure, green and recreational space, commercial and retail, historic preservation, and livability.

A top priority for the community is protecting green space, in light of last year's battle with Keswick Multi-Care Center over its since-dropped plan to buy Baltimore Country Club property and build a retirement community there.

"Master plans are important," Middleton told residents at the meeting. "This is one way to make sure we don't have happen what happened with Keswick."

But there are several potentially thorny issues facing the community as it drafts its plan, Spevak told the audience. One is how to pay for the green space it wants to protect, such as 17 acres of land the league is negotiating with the country club to buy.

That may cost as much as \$6 million, according to some estimates, daunting even for upscale Roland Park, where residents raised money to renovate the library and the fire house in the past two years.

"If we want to preserve large areas of green space, we are going to have to find a way to pay for it," Spevak said. "So, a question that will come up is, do we want to be a special benefits district and pay a surcharge on property taxes?"

"It's something in the tool chest we might have to use," said Mary Page Michel, who lives near the country club property and helped organize the charette.

Also up for debate will be whether to seek status as a city Comprehensive Historical and Architectural Preservation, or CHAP district. That may be the only way to enforce the neighborhood's restrictive covenants on sanitation, design, land use and aesthetics, league members say.

The next charette is Jan. 9, from 9 a.m. -3 p.m., again at Roland Park Elementary/Middle School.

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