

Developing Marianist land: Think small and not sprawl

Hudson's Corner

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At the February meeting of the Roland Park Civic League, developers of the Marianist site at 4301 Roland Ave., presented plans for an assisted-living facility. Since the 2007 sale of the property, the new developer, F.M. Harvey, has sought community input. That is a big plus in furthering a good neighborhood relationship that started with Harvey's renovation of St. David's Church.

Being one who believes that preserving old buildings maintains the unique character of a city and a neighborhood, I had hoped that the Marianist building would be re-used. While the currently vacant 1926 building could not be classified as an award-winning piece of architecture, it is well-built, with many architectural details similar to those in nearby 1920s houses. The 1927 Academy of the Visitation building, farther up Roland Avenue, was preserved and transformed into condominiums. I had originally hoped that the Marianist building might also become condos, or even apartments.

When Harvey's earlier proposal for 19, three-story townhouses came along, I didn't think that was a bad idea either, as long as the houses would be compatible with the neighborhood quality and style of architecture and construction.

I am still disappointed that townhouses will not be built. I know that the housing market is in a deep slump, but that will change. As Roland Parkers downsize, some new, low-maintenance, energy-efficient townhouses would be a plus.

If townhouses, apartments or condos are not possible, then a small, assisted-living facility may not be a bad solution. A 63-unit facility seems small, yet how the building is designed and constructed is key.

As always, what is important in one of America's first garden suburbs is the preservation of green space. The historic design of Roland Park maintains wide, green setbacks along the central boulevards and side streets. In recent years, "green" has been enhanced by new trees in the median, where privet hedges once screened trolley tracks.

At the Civic League meeting, the idea of the assisted living facility being a three-story building, instead of two, was suggested by several Roland Parkers. That would surely be more compatible with neighboring three-story houses and less jarring beside the condominium building at 4401 Roland Avenue. A less sprawling, taller three-story building would also preserve green space.

A three-story building might also minimize the future footprint. Undoubtedly, this facility will expand over time, as has almost every Roland Park institution, save the original Grace Methodist Church (now the North Baltimore Mennonite Church). If the assisted living facility were built in the proposed two-story design, a future vertical expansion might loom large on the site.

4301 Roland Ave. already is big, but the graceful sweep of its wide, front lawn and a driveway free of permanent parking spaces maintain an aesthetically pleasing setback. A more compact, three-story assisted living facility next door might too, particularly if the proposed front parking spaces were eliminated.

As the Civic League and developers continue talks, I urge both to think: small, not sprawl.

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