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Club's Plan to Sell Land Shatters a Baltimore Neighborhood's Serenity

By IAN URBINA Published: August 19, 2008

BALTIMORE — One of the oldest planned communities in the country, Roland Park is a bucolic place of sloping greenery, towering oaks and cedar-shingled homes tucked ever so genteelly into the north side of this city.

But things have not been going quite as planned here lately, and the red, white and blue bunting that drapes the porches here has given way recently to bed sheets hung on front fences and scrawled with protest slogans. And local teenagers have begun trading their pastel Polos for white T-shirts that read, "Keep the Park in Roland Park."

The unrest stems from plans to build an expansive new home for the elderly in the middle of this neighborhood's 30-acre country club.

Designed by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., son of the mastermind behind Central Park in New York City, the neighborhood was created and later preserved to interrupt this city's concrete sprawl with an oasis of big sky and lush fields.

Residents say the proposed development is a betrayal of that vision, and the project has sparked a family feud of sorts, pitting those who stayed in the neighborhood against those who run the country club but have moved to grander suburbs.

In July, the country club announced plans to sell 17 acres for \$12.5 million to the Keswick Multi-Care Center to build 225 independent-living units, 58 assisted-living units and a 40-bed skilled-nursing facility, plus a 403-space underground parking garage.

"This is not what the residents or Olmsted had in mind in designing this community," said Kathy Hudson, a lifelong resident, as she gave a tour of the neighborhood's protest signs. "Nature Not Bricks = Roland Park" read one. "Keswick No!" said another.

But Libby Bowerman, chief executive of the Keswick Multi-Care Center, said the project was in keeping with Olmsted's values.

"Olmsted had a holistic view of communities and the circle of life," Ms. Bowerman said. "The tapestry of the neighborhoods he created was meant to include not just green spaces but also children, young adults, adults and, don't forget, seniors."

She said that with the graying of the baby boomers and medical advances keeping

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people alive longer, Baltimore, like many other cities, faced a severe shortage of housing for the elderly.

Officials from the country club, who declined to be interviewed, said in an e-mail message that they had every right to sell the land and that the proceeds would be used to refurbish the building that remains.

If the sale is completed, the \$195 million project would still require approval from the City Council and the mayor, neither of whom have weighed in.

Either way, change has been coming for a while.

Over the last several decades, smaller projects encroached on the outskirts of Roland Park.

With five of the city's most elite high schools, including Roland Park Country School, Gilman and Bryn Mawr, the neighborhood is teeming with teenagers.

"A lot of childhood memories were made right there," Ms. Hudson said, pointing to Suicide Hill, the neighborhood's famous sledding spot that is destined to disappear if the new development goes through.

While the country club was founded in 1898 as part of the Roland Park community, most of its members have left the neighborhood. The golf course was closed in 1962, and in the last several years, the club moved its tennis complex. The grounds are now used almost exclusively for banquets and other events.

And as the crowds in tennis whites stopped appearing, the "No Trespassing" signs started sprouting up. Then came the blue and yellow ribbons. Tied around many of the perimeter's oaks, they signaled which ones would be cut down.

The hurt stung all the more, since the neighborhood's community association, the Roland Park Civic League, repeatedly bid on the parcel. Figuring that the country club would not consider offers involving development that would erase the green space, the league offered more than \$4 million for the 17 acres, a third of the price offered by Keswick. The league has said it is willing to offer more, though it has not said how much, said Dr. Philip J. Spevak, the civic league's president.

"My mother-in-law died at a nursing home here in the neighborhood," Dr. Spevak said. "I know personally how important these facilities are to have nearby."

1 | 2 | [NEXT PAGE »](#)

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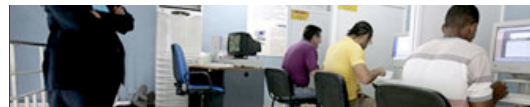
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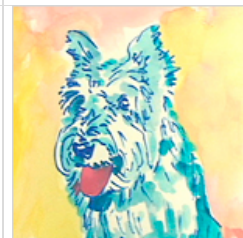
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