

\$195 million expansion planned by Keswick Retirement facility on current BCC land

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Byline: **Jamie Smith Hopkins**

Keswick Multi-Care Center in Baltimore plans to build a \$195 million continuing-care retirement community on Roland Park land now owned by the Baltimore Country Club, its CEO said yesterday.

Keswick has agreed to buy 17 acres of club property where members once played tennis. The sale requires approval by two-thirds of the club's 2,000 voting members, with a vote set for July 15. A letter sent by the Baltimore Country Club to members said the price was \$12.5 million, which Keswick confirmed. Libby Bowerman, chief executive of the long-term-care facility, said preliminary plans call for 225 independent-living units, 58 assisted-living units and 40 beds for residents in need of skilled nursing.

Keswick would build a 403-space underground parking garage as part of the construction, which could begin in 2010 if the sale goes forward and the city approves it as a "planned unit development," she said.

The complex - part of an expansion trend in the retirement industry as more Americans hit retirement age - would employ about 150. Bowerman said Keswick's campus on 40th Street in Roland Park, where 400 work, would continue to operate.

"We're almost always 98 percent occupied, and we're landlocked," she said. "We have looked at a number of other pieces of property ... but the board was very clear that they wanted to stay in Baltimore City."

Keswick and the country club began talking about six months ago. The club, which opened new tennis courts at its Five Farms campus in Timonium last summer, said other groups were also interested in buying the former tennis grounds but Keswick's project seemed a good fit.

Michael R. Stott, general manager and chief operating officer of the

country club, said the money would be used to renovate the Roland Park clubhouse, part of which dates back to 1898.

"It was surplus land," Stott said of the 17 acres. "All we were doing was kind of cutting the grass ... and there was really no need for it."

Rumors have been flying in Roland Park as residents got wind that a sale might be under way.

The country club told a Roland Park Civic League official about six weeks ago that it was thinking of selling property but did not share specific plans, said Philip Spevak, president of the community association.

He said some residents favor a retirement community, as long as it's done well, but others are concerned about traffic and the loss of green space in an up-scale neighborhood known for its park-like atmosphere.

"This is a substantial footprint of a plan in a residential area, and I would expect that there would be substantial opposition by residents who live around there, despite the fact that many feel Keswick and the country club are fine facilities," Spevak said.

The civic league has asked the club for detailed information and will take a position once the community has had a chance to see it. Spevak said he's disappointed that the club didn't come to the league earlier to allow residents a chance to raise private or public money for preservation rather than development.

Bowerman, the Keswick CEO, said traffic would be "considerably lower" at the retirement community than if the land were developed for other residential or commercial uses.

The complex, on Falls Road between Oakdale and Hillside roads, would have only one entrance.

Keswick plans about a half-dozen buildings designed to look like large houses, she said: "The exteriors of the buildings would be mimicking the Roland Park housing - like stucco, brick, porches, dormers."

Zoning on the property allows residential uses. Keswick plans to seek Baltimore City Council approval for a planned unit development this fall.

City Councilwoman Sharon Green Middleton said yesterday that Keswick has talked to her about the proposal, but she would wait for community input before taking a position.

She said Keswick officials are aware of community concerns about development and appear to be designing the plans accordingly.

"Once they get everything together for their presentation, they will set up a meeting with the community - the Roland Park Civic League and all other entities - which is what I wanted to make sure happened," Middleton said.

Continuing-care retirement communities offer a continuum of living options, so older adults can move in when they're active and don't need medical care but can stay when more assistance is required. The letter to Baltimore Country Club members, describing Keswick's planned community as "high end," said members would get preference in the initial sale of units.

Roland Park Place, next to Keswick on 40th Street, is the only accredited continuing-care retirement community in the city, said its president, Terry D. Snyder. Entrance fees there start at \$140,000; monthly fees start at \$2,900.

She said she is not surprised that Keswick, which currently has no independent-living options, sees reason to expand into continuing care. She said she has a "strong" waiting list.

"Continuing-care communities across the country are all preparing for the future market demands," said Snyder.

jamie.smith.hopkins@baltsun.com