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Land row in Roland Park

Residents fighting country club's plan to sell property for retirement homes

By Jessica Anderson

Sun Reporter

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Roland Park residents are putting up a fight to preserve what they have come to consider their own patch of green within the city.

They're pledging to oppose plans announced this month by Baltimore Country Club to sell some of its land to Keswick Multi-Care Center, which plans to build a \$195million continuing-care retirement community.

"This is truly like a volcano erupting," said Philip Spevak, president of the Roland Park Civic League.

But Keswick officials — who would need a zoning change from the City Council for the project — said that a portion of the 17-acre site north of Hillside Road would be kept undeveloped, and they plan improvements for some of that area with expanded parks and gardens.

On June 23, more than 50 Roland Park residents gathered for an informal meeting to begin organizing a petition drive and planning other efforts, including a door-to-door campaign within the community. The Roland Park Civic League will hold a formal meeting to discuss the plans at 7 p.m. tomorrow at St. David's Church, 4700 Roland Ave.

While residents acknowledge that Baltimore Country Club owns the property, Spevak said the land has been open for members of the community to walk their dogs, play with their kids and even sled.

"Roland Park and the country club were started together," he said. "There's a long historic

link," and many longtime residents "genuinely had their feelings hurt" when they weren't consulted on the plan for Keswick to buy the land from the country club for \$12.5million.

"The Baltimore Country Club hasn't been giving us the information," said Mary Page Michel, who hosted last week's meeting in her home.

She said the club has made no outreach to the community, yet "this is going to be the biggest change in 100 years," and "it's going to be a town in our neighborhood."

Officials from the country club did not respond to repeated phone calls seeking comment. But the general manager previously told The Sun that the land was surplus and that the club hopes to use the money from the sale to renovate its clubhouse.

The new facility would have 225 independent-living units, 58 assisted-living units and 40 beds for residents in need of skilled nursing, employing a total of about 150 people. The facility would also include a 403-space underground parking garage.

Libby Bowerman, chief executive officer of Keswick Multi-Care Center, said the plan would leave 7 acres "untouched," while buildings would take up to 4 acres and paved areas would take about half an acre. She said the undeveloped 7 acres would remain "open and available," but because the plans aren't finished yet, she could not say how much the rest of the grounds would be open to the public.

Bowerman said Keswick intends to add gardens and courtyards, as well as plant more trees while not removing mature trees. She also said the plan went through "intense consideration" to ensure the development would become a part of the neighborhood, allowing residents to stay in Roland Park and the city as they grow older and need more assistance.

Construction could begin in 2010 if the sale goes forward and the city approves the plan.

Despite Keswick's stated plans to include green space and maintain a neighborhood feel, many residents say that's not enough.

Spevak said that because the land is "one of the last green spaces in Roland Park and in the city," future plans for the 17 acres is of "broader importance to the city." He suggested the development would conflict with the broader goal of Baltimore officials to create more parks and recreational areas within the city.

"No one has thought it's a good plan," said resident Ann Carroll Klassen. She urged the city to work with Keswick to find a neighborhood where there would be less of an impact on community green space.

However, Bowerman said that Keswick did search for other areas around the city and

Baltimore County, but concluded that - given the preference to remain within the city limits - the Roland Park land from the country club was the only area that could accommodate the project.

Residents also question the assertion from Keswick officials that the retirement community would create less traffic than if the land were sold off for other commercial or residential uses.

While Spevak said residents aren't against a retirement community in the neighborhood, he said they would prefer to see the club's land transition to public recreational use instead of being developed.

Though the Country Club residents haven't voted yet to sell the land, already, Bowerman said there is already a waiting list of people interested in more information about the development.

The sale requires approval by two-thirds of the club's 2,000 voting members, with a vote set for July 15. The City Council would then need to take up the request to rezone the property to accommodate the retirement community.

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