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# Surprise sparked ire in land proposal

Jean Marbella  
July 4, 2008

The insurgents met to plot their next move, over lemonade and chocolate chip cookies. The level of their anger was such that even the tiniest revolutionary, a mere child, used the strongest language that her young ears probably had ever heard.

"I think this is inappropriate," she squeaked.

The defiance may be largely decorous, but Roland Park is mad. The lawns of this placid neighborhood lately have sprouted, along with the usual summer hydrangeas and lilies, signs of the ire: "Keswick NO!" and "Save the Park in Roland Park."

The tempest is over the Baltimore Country Club's proposed sale of 17 acres of its land to the Keswick Multi-Care Center, which plans to build a huge senior citizens' complex on what is now tennis courts and open space. It is, at heart, your basic NIMBY battle, but one that is aggravated by the fact that it is also something like a family feud, a familiarity that has bred the current contempt.



Jean Marbella  
E-mail | Recent columns

The neighborhood and the country club in its midst are linked by their shared history, origins and geography - a particularly lovely swath of the city's north side. But over the years, their interests have diverged as the club and its membership have largely moved to the county - its golf course and swimming complex are up in Timonium, although the historic clubhouse remains in Roland Park.

That, and 30 acres of mostly open space, an unofficial park for neighbors to stroll about, walk their dogs or, in the winter, sled down "Suicide Hill."

But last month, residents learned that the club planned to sell more than half its acreage to Keswick, and the Battle of Roland Park was under way. The opposition signs popped-up, the e-mails flew, the outrage ensued.

Like the club, Keswick is not an unknown quantity to Roland Park either, since it operates a facility just to the south on 40th Street and is home no doubt to any number of former neighborhood residents or their relatives. And yet, the revelation of the plan caught the neighborhood by surprise.

Ah yes, surprise: the one thing that a highly engaged community simply cannot abide.

I'm wondering how much of the current angst could have been avoided with a little more openness, a little more finesse on the part of the country club and Keswick. They haven't shared many details about what the facility will look like, what the neighbors can expect to see from their windows and on their streets. From *The Sun's* coverage, it doesn't

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sound entirely disastrous - senior citizens are generally considered good neighbors, not known to speed down the streets and terrorize mailboxes, after all. We're not talking about a liquefied natural gas terminal being built, as a Dundalk neighborhood is currently facing, but a group of a half-dozen buildings that supposedly would look like large houses, with a single entrance off busy Falls Road and some green space set aside for the public.

And yet the sheer size of the project - 323 residences and a 403-space underground parking garage - is enough to raise major concerns in this neighborhood of quiet, narrow and winding streets. The Civic League has asked for but not received any detailed drawings or plans that would give a sense of what's in store.

Club officials have said that they wanted their membership to vote on the deal - as it will in a week and a half - before consulting the neighborhood.

Once, the neighborhood and the club were much more one and the same thing - but Roland Park is no longer that kind of neighborhood. At one point, apparently most of the club's members lived nearby; now they're largely county residents. That adds yet another wrinkle to the tensions, those who stayed in the city versus those who abandoned it - and the fear that suburbanites have no reason to turn down \$12.5 million as a rather pricey gesture to the old neighborhood.

At this point, residents are contacting members whom they know and continuing their very public fight. Whatever hope the country club and Keswick had of finalizing the deal in the usual privacy of multimillion-dollar transactions between two private entities is long gone.

It would have gone public at some point anyway - the land will have to be rezoned for the type of density Keswick has in mind, so it will require City Council action. In the past, perhaps club officials literally would have walked across the street and said, hey, here's what we're thinking of doing. Or, more likely, they wouldn't have even had to cross the street, but simply discussed it among themselves on the golf course or in the clubhouse, and it would have been a done deal.

Membership, as the saying goes, has its privileges.

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