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FRANK DEFILIPPO'S COMMENTARY

About the Show:

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The Greening of Roland Park

Monday, July 21, 2008
Frank DeFilippo

In Roland Park, it's not easy being green whether it's money or grass.



That's the trade-off issue between the Roland Park Civic League and Keswick, the operator of high-end assisted living campuses. Keswick, as every political busybody knows, is willing to pay \$12.5 million to the Baltimore Country Club for 17 acres of its 30-acre greensward in the middle of Roland Park. Nobody's saying what'll happen to the rest of the acreage.

It's a charming situation: Old Baltimore values against new Baltimore money.

An estimated 80 percent of the club's membership voted, as reported, to approve the deal, but the Roland Park Civic League says no way and they're plunging ahead full-bore with lawyers, flacks and land-use consultants. The proposal now goes to the City Council which must consider a zoning change. Here's where the deal becomes as baroque as a Bach fugue.

Sharon Green Middleton (D-6th), the district's council member, seeking political cover, has indicated that she's willing to lie down in front of a bulldozer to block the transaction. So, too, have a couple of the 40th District's legislators, Sen. Lisa Gladden and Del. Samuel I. Sandy Rosenberg, both Democrats. (Stephanie Rawlings-Blake represented the district until she was elevated to City Council president.)

The dirty little secret that hasn't been reported, if all memory circuits are sparking, is that during the past six months the city had been conducting traffic counts along Falls Rd., which the property fronts.

And the city has also installed a traffic light at Hillside Rd., which parallels and leads into the property, and has also resurfaced Hillside Rd., a rare make-over in an urban asphalt moonscape of patches and potholes. Surveyors have also appeared periodically along Falls Rd. Think the fix is in?

Well, maybe yes, maybe no. Give the folks in transportation the benefit of the doubt. The re-surfacing of Hillside Rd. might have been in the city's CIT (comprehensive transportation program) for at least three years, as is customary for major road resurfacing projects, and the funds were probably earmarked several years ago because the road was an obstacle course and a source of income for the front-end alignment trade.

And the traffic light, rumors have it, was installed at Hillside and Falls Rds. after a fuss from residents who complained that parking is tight on the two-lane road and traffic is heavy because of motorists who use Hillside as a shortcut through Roland Park to avoid jam-ups at the crash-dummy intersection of Falls Rd. and Coldspring La.

Roland Park is not exactly Howdy Doodyville. And this is not merely a case of stereotypical blue-haired haute WASP



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NIMBY's dressed in wrap-around skirts in day-glow hues of lime and pink agitating over stuffy generational inheritance rights.

This is a genteel tradition, 100 years of it, when a handshake would settle the difference, being paraded by the new color and creed of America's palette. These are the folks who shop at Eddies and lunch at Petite Louis who relish the distinctive architectural charm and privacy of their neighborhood. They're like anybody else, only with money and a proper Baltimore address. It's refreshing to witness that some citizens haven't lost their capacity for outrage.

Roland Park is the oldest planned community in America, a contiguous community that, for the most part, is self-governing to the extent that until recent years was segregated and exclusive as well as excluding.

Roland Park required homeowners to sign covenants controlling, literally, who could live in the self-contained compound. But the courts and the law have ended all of that and the neighborhood, though still decidedly pricey and white bread, is open to anyone who can afford the address and the tariff.

In the 1960's, for example, when the esteemed James Rouse negotiated the purchase of the Baltimore Country Club's golf course along Falls Rd. to develop The Village of Cross Keys, he literally signed away development rights to the Roland Park Civic League. To this day, according to the covenants, no development or architectural changes can be made within Cross Keys without the imprimatur of the Roland Park Civic League.

Tatty old Roland Park is a place of memories – of the "morgue" (Morgan Millard), of Bachelor's Cotillions, Gilman and Roland Park Country School, sandwiches at Eddies, sledding down country club hill and old-money cocktails such as the Manhattan and Rob Roy. It's tough to let go of yesterday.

It's almost as if time hasn't touched Roland Park, with all of its weathered turrets, gables and cedar shingles.

The League has approached the country club about purchasing and preserving the land several times over the years with offers as high as \$4.3 million, about a third of the price Keswick is willing to pay. Nothing comes between good friends like good money.

If the deal goes through and Keswick gets the land, the Baltimore Country Club would retain veto power over the design of the senior living complex and the land use – the major issue among the neighborhood's country-club hill sledders and dog-walkers as well as those who enjoy the grand vista of the sloping greenery and the Gatsby-era opulence of the club house.

Now for the dicey part. Though Middleton says she opposes the sale, her voice may not be enough to block the transfer. The city's 1971 comprehensive zoning program virtually eliminated local control, a practice that used to be known as "spot zoning," whereby a district's council member(s) could dictate a decision on a zoning change without question or challenge.

Middleton, for example, could vote "no" to a change and, while her position would be taken into consideration, a voting majority of the council's remaining 13 members could decide the fate of the deal and override her expressed wishes. Or, they could extend local courtesy.

Building the proposed \$195 million Keswick senior citizen complex on the country club site would remove a \$4.9 million assessment from the city's property tax base because Keswick's a non-profit 501(c) 3 organization. It pays no taxes.

What the development would bring to the residential area is an estimated 150 jobs, mostly at the low-end of the wage scale. Add to the community anxiety an underground garage with 403 parking spaces to accommodate employees as well as visitors and unwelcome traffic along the car-strangled Falls Rd. corridor.

The Council's choice is as clear as a church bell on a cold night: Is sacrificing 30 acres of lush, irreplaceable greenery, and alienating one of Baltimore's highest taxed neighborhoods, worth 150 low-paying jobs?

If the good burghers in Roland Park are really serious, they should have no trouble raising \$12.5 million in pledges and bank loans from among the community's residents to match Keswick's offer.

And with a Zip Code like Roland Park, and the vote-pulling power of the district, the residents ought to be able to secure a grant from the state's open spaces program and take down the for sale sign forever.

As Will Rogers observed, "Buy land, there ain't no more of it."

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