Residents Concerned About Church Redevelopment

The December Council meeting was held in the main room at the Town Hall to accommodate the approximately 25 residents interested in the plan for the former Baptist church at 2 Vassar Circle. Aaron Hirsch has a contract to purchase the property with plans to demolish the church and build four homes on the parcel. The contract is currently under a study period until January 5 with a signature date planned for February 5. The proposed redevelopment will require subdivision approval from the County Planning Board. That process will take four to eight months’ time, during which the Town government and residents can influence the County approval process. No specific date has been set for demolition of the church, but a demolition application is pending approval from the County. Mr. Hirsch was at the Council meeting to present additional details, after introducing his concept at the November Council meeting. Many of the details and background of the plan were reported in the December edition of The Echo.

Much of the 90-plus minutes of discussion centered on three main topics: additional information associated with the development plan; resident opposition to the development, including several proposals...
THE ECHO

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Next Deadline: January 20, 2014

Letters to the Editor are welcome. They must be signed. Articles for publication are also solicited. Please send comments about The Echo to the Editor, the Mayor, or any Council member. Volunteer reporters are always needed.

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Next Town Council Meeting
January 13, 2014, at 8 pm

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for alternatives; and significant concern on the part of the Council and residents regarding traffic and parking on the narrow Vassar Circle.

Subdivision Planned

The discussion began with a presentation by Mr. Hirsch. To procure the property from the National Community Church (NCC), the current owner, he was bidding against other developers and expressed a belief that, in the end, the NCC accepted his bid because he will be a resident of the Town. Hirsch purchased the former Baptist Annex and is in the process of renovating the building to use as a residence. His potential development plan for this site includes four 3500-square-foot farmhouse style homes, each with a driveway and off-street parking for three cars. Montgomery County regulations require parking for at least two cars. Mr. Hirsch presented drawings of homes like the planned homes on the circle from various perspectives. The houses he showed are not necessarily what will be built but rather types of houses he favors. Some residents expressed concern about the contour of the land and its impact on overall building heights. In answer to questions, Mr. Hirsch stated that storm runoff and right-of-way concerns will be addressed as part of the zoning and planning process. These will have to be reviewed and approved by the Planning Board and utility companies.

Hometown Aspect

During his presentation, Mr. Hirsch pointed to his current development of the former Baptist Church Annex at University and Harvard Avenues. He plans to live in the house and he offered to discuss with anyone the many reasons he and his wife chose to live in Glen Echo. He believes his remodeling of the church annex is compatible with the nature of the Town and wanted to reassure residents that he will approach Vassar Circle in the same way. He stated he intended his plan to be compatible with the Town (small lots and farmhouse-style homes) but also it has to be financially feasible and in keeping with current market demands, in which larger homes are desired. Even with those assurances, some residents expressed skepticism and pointed out that in some cases developers have been known to move out of the area once the development is complete.

Neighbors’ Objections

Opposition to the development plan was expressed by several residents, at times quite passionately, with a range of concerns. Cris White, a Vassar Circle resident, discussed with Mr. Hirsch the idea of making half the property a park and building two houses on the other half. According to Mr. Hirsch, this proposal does not work financially, based on the cost of property. Cris’s wife, Anna, advocated for using the circle as a “celebratory space” and wanted the Council to explore ways to do so. One suggestion was to trade other Town-owned land (including the two small parks at University and Princeton and the existing Town Hall building) for the 2 Vassar Circle Property. This approach would allow the church to be renovated and used as a new Town Hall location and perhaps the other two properties could be redeveloped. The Mayor noted that the NCC had estimates for $1.5 million to renovate the church building, that those renovations may not be adequate for Town Hall needs, and that after trading property the Town would still not have enough funds to perform the renovation.

During the meeting, the idea of dividing the prop-
erty into more than four lots was raised. The idea of building 16 tiny houses was mentioned and drew a few chuckles. Mr. Hirsch expressed an interest in tiny houses and stated, “If you let me build 16 tiny houses I would definitely consider it.” Apparently, there is a Tiny House Movement and further information can be found at www.thetinylife.com.

**Attorney’s Opinion**

In response to residents’ concerns about the development, Mayor Beers distributed a memo from Town Attorney, Norman Knopf, who was present at the meeting, regarding options the Town has with regard to the subdivision and development of 2 Vassar Circle.

It was noted that the Town itself does not have zoning authority. Options discussed included purchase of the property if it is for sale, imposition of stricter height and setback standards, and active participation in subdivision proceedings at the Planning Board. Specific topics that could be discussed with the Planning Board include adequate storm water management measures and adequate street access as conditions of approval.

The Town Attorney stated that even if the Town opposes the subdivision for what may be considered valid reasons, the plan would not be dismissed. In that case, four out of the five members of the Planning Board must vote for approval rather than the normal three. During the Council meeting, Mr. Knopf reinforced the notion that legally valid reasons for opposition to any subdivision are not the same as many of the reasons that residents expressed during the meeting.

One area of contention was whether the four pie-shaped wedges planned by Mr. Hirsch are compatible with the rest of the Town since so many of the Town’s lots are square or rectangular.

**Parking and Traffic**

Significant discussion centered on the impact this development would have on parking and traffic around the narrow streets. Truck traffic on the circle already barely can stay on the road and in some cases trucks leave ruts in yards when they go off the road. One resident said, “We need to have wider streets.”

The impact on street parking came up several times. Residents were concerned that such large homes would invite larger families with more than three cars and further crowd an already crowded street with resident parking. The issue of getting in and out of the driveways was also raised as a concern. It was suggested that driveways be angled in a way to make backing in and out onto the one-way Vassar Circle easier. Mr. Hirsch said he would consider that. One idea, not discussed at the meeting but which could also be considered, is the use of shared driveways to reduce the number of areas impacted around the circle. Finally, the idea of aligning the driveways with University and Cornell Avenues was raised as another approach to improve the plan.

**Widening Vassar Circle**

An area of primary focus was on the issue of right of way and whether the Town, for the purpose of widening Vassar Circle, could claim part of the property and reduce Mr. Hirsch’s lot size. Mr. Hirsch expressed a concern that if this happened he could be forced into subdividing into three lots. If this is the case, Hirsch said that this would allow and financially require him to build three larger homes. Mr. Hirsch said, “This is a town of small lots” and encouraged the Town not to pursue this approach. Detailed questions were raised about the property survey and the Council decided that a professional survey was necessary to answer many of the questions regarding existing right-of-ways and easements. Mr. Hirsch offered to share the cost of the survey.

**Other Town Council News**

The Town received a letter from The Glen Echo Park Partnership for Arts and Culture requesting a one-time increase from $2000 to $2300 in the annual gift from the Town. Mayor Beers, quoting from the letter, stated, “They have suffered extraordinary losses as
the result of the closing of the Park for the better part of a month or more.” The Council discussed the merits of the increase and the fact that the Park had paid for use of the Town Hall during the shutdown. The Council passed a measure to increase the gift to $2300 this year.

Glen Echo Park Report

Aaron LaRocca, representing Glen Echo Park and the Clara Barton House, reported on recent developments. In December the National Park Service (NPS) announced its intent to rehabilitate the Clara Barton House. This will include three projects: fire suppression, climate control, and roof replacement. Funding for the fire suppression project is available this fiscal year and the NPS is looking for a location where it can relocate the nearly 45,000 artifacts before the projects can begin.

From December 15 through February, the Clara Barton House will be closed on Mondays and Tuesdays as part of a personnel management effort during the slower winter months. NPS is working with the State of Maryland to address spring water draining onto the ramp from the Clara Barton Parkway to the American Legion Bridge.

Finally, the George Washington Memorial Parkway has secured a grant to re-establish Dyke Marsh, which has been slowly eroding away since the 1930’s.
Holiday Party Photos


Chuck Violand with Sascha, baby Bryndis, and Eden Haverfield

Matt, Dia, and Tea Costello

Max White

Susan Thon, Susan Grigsby, and Carlotta Anderson
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LADIES OF GLEN ECHO
Ladies Night
on Thursday,
January 16, at 8 pm
At the home of
Debra Batista
6108 Bryn Mawr Ave
RSVP: 301-351-2045

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**Tutoring:** French classes, ESL or homework tutoring, $30/hour, days and times negotiable. I am a certified teacher with nine years of experience, master’s degree in TESOL/ESOL from American University, bachelor’s degree in biology from the University of Maryland, attended the French Lycee in Bethesda. Call Stephanie Rhein at 301-229-7910.

**Piano lessons:** $30/hour. I have been playing the piano for 30 years. I love to play and would love to teach piano to your children or to you. Please call Stephanie Rhein at 301-229-7910 if interested.

**Babysitting:** I am a responsible Whitman student available for babysitting. I passed the SafeSitter course at Suburban Hospital. Call Annie at 301-922-7840 or email at anniekreat1999@gmail.com

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GLEN ECHO TOWN HALL EVENTS

These events are free to Town residents.

FSGW English Country Dance
every Wednesday, 8–10:30 pm

FSGW Concert:
Doug MacPhee with Adam Bern
Thursday, January 2, 8 pm

Encore Chorale
Washington Conservatory of Music
at Glen Echo Park
Thursday, January 16
1:30 pm to 3 pm for 15 weeks.
New adults, age 55 and over, are invited to join this group who sing in four parts at performances in community concerts. For registration or more information see www.encorecreativity.org or call 301-261-2747.

Church of the Redeemer
The Yale Spizzwinks (?) in Concert
Sunday, January 5, at 5 pm
The Yale Spizzwinks (?), America’s oldest underclassman a cappella group, will entertain with a unique blend of sweet harmony and tongue-in-cheek humor. The suggested donation is $15. Redeemer Church.

Concert Organist Simon Thomas Jacobs
Sunday, February 9, at 5 pm

Real Estate Report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Status</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6001 Bryn Mawr Ave</td>
<td>$1,699,000</td>
<td>For Sale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44 Wellesley Circle</td>
<td>$1,495,000</td>
<td>For Sale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Vassar Circle</td>
<td>$1,749,000</td>
<td>Contingent contract</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Update on Gas Installation
Nicole Fraser reported that a work session is planned with Washington Gas on January 10. Since Montgomery County permits have been issued, this will be a construction scheduling meeting. The Mayor and Council members have been asked to attend. As of press time the meeting time was not determined.

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Glen Echo Park Activities

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Jan. 17–Feb. 9
*Tiny Tots*
Select Weds, Sats, and Suns at 10 am
See [www.thepuppetco.org](http://www.thepuppetco.org)
or call 301-634-5380

Adventure Theatre MTC
*Miss Nelson is Missing*
Jan. 17–Mar. 9
See [www.adventuretheatre-mtc.org](http://www.adventuretheatre-mtc.org)
or call 301-634-2270

Oxford Road Snow Creature

The two-headed snow creature shown to the left was spotted on Oxford Road.

We Wish Everyone a Warm and Joyous New Year

The Echo Staff