

Summary of the November 6 Meeting of the *Coalition for Neighborhood Character & Quality*

Over 100 people attended, including three members of the press. A presentation was made—much of it is summarized below—and then an extensive discussion ensued. The next meeting of the Coalition will be Tuesday, December 10 at 7:30 at the Tribute House.

Setting the stage

The redevelopment of the St. Charles property is in the early stages and the Coalition hopes to capitalize on this fact. We believe the neighbors will exercise the most influence over the development process by engaging Bishop Senior and the Township at the beginning as plans are being formed. To participate effectively, we need to be prepared and organized. The size of our membership is important for our effectiveness.

The Coalition's predecessor was a Facebook group of concerned immediate neighbors of St. Charles that came into existence shortly after the Seminary's announcement in Spring 2013 that it intends to sell or lease some of its property. However, we quickly recognized the importance of broad-based support and assistance consisting of membership from all streets in all affected neighborhoods.

The Coalition is a non-profit 501(c)(4) organization. We expect to need legal and expert advice in order to be most effective and it's easier to retain experts and legal counsel as a formal organization.

Background on the Seminary

The Seminary plans to lease or sell approximately 45 acres, including the historic College building and Chapel near the main entrance. To remain viable, the Seminary needs funds to rebuild a depleted endowment and it also needs to stem the \$1 million annual loss associated with carrying underutilized facilities and land. Operations will be consolidated into the buildings closest to the Indian Creek development. Recent press accounts indicate that the Seminary hopes to double its overall enrollment in the coming years. We have no information on the number of staff, employees or visitors who are on the property daily. There is no indication this number will decrease.

The property is currently zoned R-3, or residential with a roughly quarter-acre lot requirement. At 45 acres, that means approximately 180 single-family homes could be constructed on the site. Alternatively, the property might qualify for the

Township's historical redevelopment ordinance, permitting approximately the same number of units in the existing College building.

Last summer the Bishop convened a focus group with representatives from various stakeholder groups including bordering Civic Associations, Lower Merion School District, the Township, Commissioners Liz Rogan and Brian Gordon, and Todd Sinai, who represented the early Facebook group and is a Wharton professor of Real Estate. The focus group met twice to discuss the community's vision and goals for the neighborhood and how St. Charles fits into that vision. A white paper was issued and will be available to interested developers who participate in the second round of the RFP process. (The white paper is on our website.) The Seminary also retained HFF, L.P., a provider of commercial real estate and capital market services, to help with the RFP process. The RFP document has not been provided to the Coalition. We understand the Bishop hopes to receive responses to the RFP by early 2014.

In August, the Township prepared a proposal for temporary public field use at St. Charles without notifying or consulting the neighbors. Because we were already a nascent group, we were able to shape the proposal in a way that would facilitate the field use while imposing the least burden on the surrounding neighborhoods. For example, the Township's original proposal had automobile access to the fields – as many as 100 cars coming and going every time the fields changed over – from E. Wynnewood Road. The revised proposal has access via a pre-existing gate and driveway on Lancaster Ave. In addition, the Township clarified to the neighbors that they planned the field use to be for practice only and they intended to schedule a one-hour gap between use to minimize the volume of cars at the turnover. We encouraged them to state those plans explicitly in the proposal; to define what they meant by “temporary” use; and to not allow lights or loudspeakers. The revised proposal was submitted to the Bishop, but he has yet to act on it. This episode underscores the importance of early organization and preparation as a means both to participate and be effective in the development process. In particular, it proved to be necessary to retain an attorney to facilitate the communications with the Township.

The Township has expressed long-term interest in acquiring or using playing fields on the Seminary property.

Background in the context of development in the Township

The redevelopment of St. Charles is not an isolated event. To understand the full implication the sale will have on our neighborhood, it's important to see this

redevelopment in the context of the other development in our immediate area and in the Township overall.

- Palmer Seminary, also a historic structure and located at Lancaster and City Avenues, underwent a change of use from a seminary to apartment units. It was recently rezoned from R-3 to R-7, effectively doubling the allowable number of units.
- An approved 250-unit apartment/condo building at the Merriam Estate on Penn Rd near the Wynnewood train station has cleared legal hurdles. This complex is part of a Township-wide trend of increasing the number of housing units by permitting apartment development. Currently there are over 2100 apartment units approved for development in Lower Merion, many of them in large, multi-hundred-unit developments located in the eastern end of the Township. There are similar developments rumored to be in the pipelines, particularly along E. Wynnewood Rd. and along City Avenue, that have not yet been submitted to the Township. If just the currently approved units are developed, the total number of apartment units in the Township will increase by 40% and the total number of housing units will increase by 10%!
- Whole Foods is expanding to nearly triple its current size—i.e., to expand to 45,000 square feet. The developer accumulated nearly all of the properties along E. Wynnewood Rd from the existing Whole Foods to Penn Rd. The same developer will also build a small strip mall between the new Whole Foods and Penn Rd.
- Wynnewood Shopping Center will now house a DSW in the old Borders building. There is interest—by the mall owner-- in restaurant/bars with extended hours, including possibly a Mad for Mex, which will potentially increase late evening noise in the neighborhood and traffic along E. Wynnewood Road.

Issues going forward

The Seminary plans to consolidate its operations onto less than half its current parcel, with intentions to double the size of its operations. The remaining 45 acres will be developed, possibly including playing fields. The result will be a much higher intensity of use on the full 75 acres than what we have today.

There are a lot of unknowns in terms of how the St. Charles redevelopment will play out. However, the value of the land increases with greater and greater density of development. Here are some issues for both parcels, the one to be sold and the one to be retained:

- What will the redevelopment of the 45 acres look like? Will the Commissioners allow retail, residential, or offices? Many of these potential uses are not allowed under current zoning and would require legislative approval by the Commissioners.
- What will be the resulting density? Will the buyer attempt to increase density beyond current zoning, as was done with Palmer Seminary? If so, how much of an increase in density will the Township allow?
- What will happen to the green space? Will there be playing fields or will the open space be for passive use? Will the public have access to the green space?
- Will the historic College structure be preserved? What about the Chapel? There are also historic structures in the cluster of buildings near Indian Creek. Will those be preserved or will the Seminary want to demolish any of those buildings for new construction? None of the historic buildings on the Seminary property have been designated as such.
- What kind of parking will be allowed, how much, and where? What impact will the development have on traffic, including short-cutting through the neighborhoods and increased congestion, particularly along E. Wynnewood Rd., with spillover along the Bowman-Remington route that is an alternative to City Avenue? Where will ingress/egress for the development and the Seminary be located?
- Will water runoff become a problem with new impervious surfaces and the slope of the property?
- What impact will an increase in density have on the quality of our schools and public services, and what will happen to the level of taxes necessary to support those public services?
- If the Township secures permanent playing fields, how intense will be the usage? Might there be weekend tournaments with lights and loud speakers?

These potential effects can be illustrated by describing a few general scenarios. First, the developer could work within current zoning, demolish the College building and construct approximately 180 houses/townhouses (these would be clustered on half of the parcel, as required by the Township's Open Space ordinance). Or, the developer could renovate the existing structure to house approximately the same number of units.

Or, the developer could seek a zoning change. If the Commissioners allow a zoning change, there are many possible outcomes. The Township allowed 132 apartment units (and 14,000 square feet of office) on the Palmer Seminary's 7.6 acres. Simply scaling up to the size of the St. Charles parcel yields nearly 800 apartment units and 80,000 square feet of office. Alternative proposed uses could be a mix of commercial and residential, or just commercial—including potential additional structures built on the site.

Despite the uncertainty, there will be upstream and downstream effects up and down E. Wynnewood Rd. and along its tributaries due to the St. Charles development and other development along E. Wynnewood Rd. Therefore, it is important that the Coalition keeps residents (and the Coalition members) apprised of all land development matters along E. Wynnewood Road.

What the Coalition stands for and what we hope to accomplish

The Coalition will seek to learn and represent the views and concerns of the neighbors. Those views and concerns are not yet precisely known, but there are a few broad principles that the Coalition stands for:

- Preserving the character and quality of the neighborhood;
- Preserving open space;
- Ensuring that the community is able to participate meaningfully in the development process; and
- Keeping the community informed

Change will occur. The Seminary needs funds to stay viable and it has rights under current zoning. Nonetheless, we hope to influence that change to minimize the impact, if any, it will have on our community.

It is important that we establish a fund for experts and legal advice. We anticipate that there necessarily will be legal and expert costs because we will need advice and legal representation in order for the Coalition to be heard and taken seriously. We saw this over the summer with the Township's field use proposal, and we are familiar with other instances of community organization in analogous circumstances. The types of experts we may need include traffic and parking engineers, hydrologists, zoning experts, and attorneys.

Broad participation is needed

There are many ways to participate and contribute. The Coalition will need specific relevant skills including public relations, communications, marketing, fundraising, web design, graphic design, community organizing, and real estate and zoning knowledge. We will need people to attend Township meetings to show support for the Coalition. We will need block captains to orchestrate turnout at very important Township meetings, and to spread the word. We will need people to write letters to the *Main Line Times* and the *Inquirer*. And, we will need monetary donations. Please keep in mind that since it's early in the process, there will be many opportunities for members to be involved and to help out.

One might ask, “*What influence do we really have in the process?*” The Coalition believes the answer is “*A lot!*” There are several avenues for communicating our views, such as (1) our relationship with the Bishop, who is our neighbor; (2) a formal and public Township review process that is quite extensive and could involve the Zoning Hearing Board, the Planning Commission, and the Board of Commissioners; (3) an informal lobbying process involving the Township staff and the Board of Commissioners, and (4) the political process. Public consideration requires participation and the Coalition intends to participate along all possible avenues.

Next meeting

The Coalition will meet again on Tuesday, December 10 at 7:30 at the Tribute House. The purpose of the meeting is to begin a process of gathering opinions & views from our members so that the community can determine more precisely what outcomes it desires. Updates on any new developments will also be provided.