

St. Charles Borromeo Seminary

Community Focus Group Report, June 2013

INTRODUCTION

As a part of the overall process of future planning for the buildings and property of St. Charles Borromeo, the Seminary Rector, Bishop Timothy Senior, invited a group of community and neighborhood leaders to participate in a Focus Group to help the Seminary to understand the community's vision and goals for the neighborhood's future and how the Seminary's plans can be a part of that vision.



The Focus Group participants were asked to meet twice – once on June 3 and a second time on June 17, 2013. The meetings were hosted at the Seminary from 7 to 9 pm on each of these Monday evenings. The Seminar retained Marisa Guerin of Guerin Management Consulting, Inc. to facilitate the discussions and prepare the report.

The first focus group session on June 3 provided an occasion for a briefing from Bishop Senior to recap the main elements of the Seminary's planning so far, and then engaged all participants in providing their views about the features of St. Charles that are valued, the positive possibilities in potential changes, and negative possibilities that would be of concern. Additional conversation produced advice for the Seminary on the process they might use as the project advances.

The second focus group session on June 17 engaged the group in further open exchange of thoughts about the Seminary's options. In this meeting, participants also offered their suggestions in response to the Bishop's question about how the Seminary might best continue to keep neighbors informed, especially at milestone points in the process.

This document reports the values and concerns of the persons attending the two focus group sessions at this very preliminary phase. It can serve the Seminary as an initial indicator of community views on the development project that the Seminary intends to pursue, and may help to inform Seminary leadership and consultants as they advance the project.

SEMINARY – COMMUNITY FOCUS GROUP ATTENDEES, JUNE 3 AND 17, 2013

William Becker, Lower Merion Township Land Use Committee, and Principal, Becker and Frondorf

Bruce Kirkpatrick, Wynnewood Civic Association, Land and Use Subcommittee (Attended June 3)

Dan D'Aquila, Wynnewood Civic Association, President (Attended June 17)

Robert Duncan, Lower Merion Township

Brian Gordon, Ward 12 Commissioner, Attorney

Leslie Greenberg, Merion Civic Association, Zoning Committee Chair

Chris McGinley, Lower Merion School District Superintendent

Joan Hindin, Shortridge Civic Association, President (June 3)

Scott Kalner, Merion Civic Association, President, HARB Chair

Kevin Maurer, Overbrook Farms Club, President

Elizabeth Rogan, Ward 7 Commissioner, LMT Board President

Todd Sinai, Merion Resident, Professor, Real Estate Economics Wharton

Bishop Timothy Senior, St. Charles Seminary Rector

Facilitator: **Marisa Guerin**, PhD., President Guerin Management Consulting.

Invited but unable to attend: **Sherry Horowitz**, Indian Creek Resident, Attorney



SUMMARY OF BRIEFING REGARDING SEMINARY PLANS

Bishop Senior recapped for the benefit of all attendees the plans that have been public since March 2013 regarding the future possibilities for the St. Charles Borromeo campus.

The Seminary as an institution was started in 1832, chartered in 1838, and has been at the current location on City Avenue since 1870. It is an independently-incorporated institution within the network of Catholic organizations in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. It provides services to the Archdiocese through its programs for the education and formation of future priests, deacons, and lay leaders.

This point is important because the Seminary is financially independent of the Archdiocese. Its revenues come from enrollments, investment income, and an annual funding appeal to the wider community of Catholics. However, the Seminary operates at an enrollment level that is reasonably steady but is well below the capacity for which the buildings were created years ago, in an era of many more vocations to the priesthood. In addition to the lower enrollment, the Seminary has been overly dependent on its investments and annual appeal, which have been adversely affected in recent years by the financial markets and by the effect on Catholic giving patterns, in part attributable to the abuse scandal in the Church.

The combination of these factors has led to an operating budget with unsustainable annual operating losses, a significant portion of which goes to maintain vacant space.

Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput and the Board of Trustees of the Seminary believe that the Seminary has a future. It is a unique institution on the Eastern seaboard and serves many dioceses; with a manageable operating budget, it would have the potential to thrive.

The Trustees considered and rejected the option of relocating the Seminary entirely to a different campus. Instead, they have publicly communicated their plans to consolidate Seminary programs in the building currently used for upper level Theology students on the northwestern side of the campus. That building and approximately 30 acres of the land around it would remain in active use for the Seminary.



The Seminary Board wishes to relieve the pressure on the budget by leasing or selling the land and the main building and chapel located on the approximately 46 acres remaining that one sees from the three roads on its boundaries, City Avenue, Lancaster Avenue, and East Wynnewood Road.

In effect, the endowment available to the Seminary to fund its operations is its property; it has no other resource to rely upon. The Seminary can assure its future by becoming more efficient and by finding new revenue-producing uses for the land and building.



The Seminary remains open to multiple options and as of the time of the focus group sessions had not settled on any one option, had not issued an RFP, and had not made any commitments to any interested developers. Bishop Senior indicated that while there might be a desire to discover options that involve a ground lease rather than sale, and while the Seminary desires a result that balances several important values and not just revenue, the fact remains that the primary reason for considering new uses for this property is to provide an income stream that can assure the future of the Seminary. Bishop Senior emphasized that his primary goal is to accomplish the mission of the seminary, and the property holdings are an asset to support this mission.

THE FOCUS GROUP INPUT PROCESS

The Focus Group participants were invited to identify their responses to three different questions. For each question, all of the answers from all of the participants were recorded, without debate and without attempting to form consensus. After all three rounds were completed, an open discussion period followed for any further input, clarification questions, ideas, or advice that might be helpful.

The responses to each of the three main questions are listed following.

VALUED FEATURES

What is it about Sr. Charles' presence in Overbrook that you value and would want to see preserved, if possible, in future uses of the property?

The responses to this question were almost universally consistent and centered on the following short list of key values.

- The most frequently-named feature for preservation was the **open space** of the campus, mentioned by almost every participant.
- Many persons identified a cluster of values closely-related to open space but with a more specific **aesthetic** emphasis, using words like **serenity and beauty**.
- Several other persons mentioned a different value also related to preserving open space, which would be **low-intensity use** – e.g., not many people or cars.
- The second most frequent cluster of values centered on the preservation of the **historic architecture** of the main building, chapel and campanile (bell tower).
- Frequently and specifically mentioned was the vista from Wynnewood Road of its **main gates and entry drive**.



POSSIBILITIES

What positive possibilities can you imagine in future new uses of the property?

The range of responses to this question was broader than to the first one. Several points are recognizably related to the values named in the first round, others branch out into specific project ideas.



- Preservation of **open space**
- The **seminary becomes financially viable** without having to change the physical character of the property.
- **No new construction** on the ~ 40 acres to be designated for sale or lease – includes the footprint of the main seminary college building, chapel, and the fields on three sides of the building bordering E. Wynnewood Road, City Avenue, and Lancaster Avenue.
- **No disruption of entry vista** from Wynnewood Road
- Retain **historic architecture** of main building
- **Limited density**
- **Minimal impact** on neighbors' enjoyment of their properties.
- **Improved buffer** between upper division seminary building and bordering neighbors.
- **Community-shared uses** of the property, such as athletic fields
- **Residential conversion** of the main building (some participants specified for **age-restricted** 55+ condominium housing)
- **Retirement** residences
- **Healthplex-type** luxury sports club concept
- St. Martin's **Chapel available** for wider use by the community, especially in combination with residential conversion options for the main building.
- **Single family** homes / townhomes
- Luxury resort **hotel**
- **Tax revenue generating** uses
- Public/Private/Religious **development partnership**
- Contribution to **community vitality**, complement and enhance neighborhood
- Good, long-horizon **partner**
- **Seminary remains successful** with increased enrollment
- There was receptivity for a wider range of **options** on the side of the property **bordering Lancaster** Avenue, although these have not been vetted with the community. Possibilities to be explored include low-rise medical office, town houses, or clustered luxury homes.
- Mix of uses that **pay back over different time frames**.
- Possibilities for "**mixed use**" **development** (ground floor retail and residential units above) **along City Ave**. It could create an inviting, active streetscape that ties to the Overbrook train station. If parking were in the rear of the buildings it might also serve a dual purpose for playing fields

CONCERNS

What potential negatives would concern you regarding future new uses of the property?

Many discrete possible concerns were identified most of them of a general nature that could apply to various different potential future uses.



- **Intensity of Use/Overload of the site**
 - Excessive traffic flow
 - Impact of entrance placement on neighborhood traffic patterns,
 - Impact of traffic flow before and after school.
 - High intensity lighting, parking lots, noise and light.
 - Uses that overload the site and dispel the serenity;
 - Excessively-high-density occupancy of the building resulting from the desire to preserve open space
- **Constraints on Seminary**
 - Any development not consistent with Seminary mission or long term stability, loss of Seminary use
 - Local constraints on development so great that Seminary sustainability is compromised
 - Seminary loses necessary flexibility to renovate and develop the Theology division building
 - Development plans involve the Seminary in extensive litigation etc.
- **Construction impact:**
 - Any major construction along City Avenue
 - New construction in front of historic building facing Wynnewood Road
 - Impact on neighbors bordering Theology building property
- Any **commercial use** on this property/heavy non-residential uses
- Any use resulting in the **demolition of the historic buildings**
- Large numbers of potential additional **students**; impact on school buildings
- **Water** run-off
- **Proliferation of housing** units or rental units built on open space
- Leasing of the facility to a **charter school**
- Concern about whether the developer selection process would be open to all.
- Cost / profit dictate negative outcomes
- Public shortsightedness

LOOKING AHEAD

The focus group meetings provided a forum for a very lively and candid exchange. The discussion did not center only on the values, possibilities, and concerns of the community; attendees also offered input to the Seminary about the process of the project based on their experiences and knowledge.

The gathered participants in the two focus group sessions expressed the hope that the Seminary leadership would continue to communicate with the surrounding community and would continue to invite feedback at key junctures.

Bishop Senior expressed great appreciation for the generous commitment of time that the focus group participants gave to these sessions. He assured those present of his own intention to keep the neighbors informed of major steps in the process, and kept open the question of future opportunities for community input as the project progresses.

These notes are provided as information for the use of the Seminary and for those who participated in the focus group sessions.

Submitted June 23, 2013

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