

Misunderstandings Abound in Cecilian Village Project

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The dispute over the Sisters of St. Joseph's (SSJ) proposal to place 49 units of low-income senior housing in the historic Pelham district of Mt. Airy has, as it should, generated a great deal of debate in this papers' letters columns as well as in many private discussions. But along with reasoned argument and debate have come some serious mistakes and misimpressions about what is at issue in this dispute. I would like to correct one of them here.

The most serious—and indeed appalling—charge that has been made in this debate is that WMAN is acting to protect the interests of well-off and mostly white homeowners who fear that the proposed project will bring low-income and mostly black senior citizens into their midst. This claim has been a sub-text in some letters to the editor that have recently published. And we have heard reports of people making this charge privately. Those who have initiated or repeated this calumny should be ashamed of themselves.

First, even if Donald Trump were to propose building 49 (or 25 or even 10) luxury apartments on this site, HUPP and WMAN would oppose the project. The fundamental issue for us is the introduction of an apartment building that occupies most of two lots in this historic area. Pelham is not just a collection of single family houses but a planned development in which the arrangement of houses and the sweeping lawns and trees between them are central to the design. The SSJ proposal would destroy part of that design. And it would set a precedent that could destroy the rest of it. We must save this neighborhood, not just for the neighbors who have bought and restored homes with the hope and expectation of seeing the design preserved, but also for all of us who can appreciate and learn from this splendid area.

Second, WMAN is an organization whose board and members are deeply committed to maintaining the diversity of our community. WMAN was founded in 1959 to promote racial diversity and interracial cooperation as an alternative to the patterns of racial separation and segregation that divide our metropolitan area. Nearly four decades after its founding, WMAN was recognized by a HUD-sponsored study of racially diverse neighborhoods for its role in helping to create and preserve a nationally recognized integrated neighborhood.

We are proud of our neighborhood's diversity. It is simply wrong to say that the Pelham neighborhood is rich and white. This neighborhood, like most others in West Mt. Airy, is integrated in practically all respects. The members of Homeowners United to Protect Pelham (HUPP) are both white and African American. Some have high incomes, while others have incomes that are much lower. All of them oppose the construction of a large apartment building on the Cecilian Academy site. And all of them have chosen to live in a neighborhood that is one of the most diverse in the city. Sixty seven percent of the people who live in Census Tract 237, in which Pelham is located, are black while twenty six percent are white. Seventeen percent of the residents of this area have a household income less than \$20,000 per year—which is only slightly lower than the city wide average of twenty four percent. Only six percent of the population in this census tract have a household income of more than \$125,000, exactly the same percentage as for the city as a whole. The Pelham area's median household income of \$42,917 is barely higher than the median household income in the city as a whole, \$40,106.

Third, neither WMAN nor the residents of Pelham oppose housing facilities for the poor and elderly. Indeed, the residents of Pelham have chosen a neighborhood in which eleven percent of the population lives in what the census bureau calls “group quarters.” (In the city as a whole, only four percent of the population lives in facilities of this kind.) The members of HUPP have welcomed low-income senior housing just around the corner from them. They were, for example, supportive of the city’s spending \$8.1 million to rehabilitate Emlen Arms as an independent living facility for the low-income elderly.

The difference in the Emlen Arms case points to the central issue: Although Emlen Arms is just a half-block from Pelham Road, it is not part of the historic Pelham development. A large apartment building on the Emlen Arms site does not detract from the Pelham district, as would the Cecilian Village proposal. Nor did the creation of public housing at Emlen Arms create any precedents for the conversion of single family homes to multiple dwelling units. Moreover, rather than harming the larger neighborhood, the rehabilitation of Emlen Arms improved it. (The SSJ project could have a similar effect if it were moved to a better site in Mt Airy.)

WMAN remains committed to creating more low-income senior housing in Mt. Airy. We have met with the regional director of HUD and discovered that it is possible for the Sisters to transfer the almost six million dollar grant they have received to another site. Vernon Price, of Councilwoman Donna Reed Miller’s office, has identified three alternative sites. I am sure we can find others as well. We would welcome the SSJ project at any of these sites. Moreover, most of these sites would allow for the creation of more than 49 units. Yet so far the Sisters of St. Joseph have been unwilling to even consider these alternatives to their current plans.

There is no reason for the community to be at loggerheads with the Sisters of St. Joseph over this issue. We can both preserve the Pelham district and create low-income senior housing in Mt. Airy.