



**Ginter Park Residents Association
Sherwood Park Civic Association
Westwood Tract Joint Task Group**

Progress Report - June 30, 2014

As many of our fellow Ginter Park and Sherwood Park residents know, members of the Westwood Tract Joint Task Group had an opportunity to work with the Union Presbyterian Seminary's (UPS) design team, as well as staff from the City Planning Office at a design exercise on Thursday, June 12, which was facilitated by Douglas Cole, an independent local land planner and a member of the City Planning Commission.

Many of us in the working group have, over the past several months, come to the realization that it is highly unlikely that there will be some miracle that would make the Seminary's development of the tract unnecessary. We have had many discussions within our group and some have had discussions with the Seminary's representatives including the UPS President Bryan Blount, along the lines of tax-credit leveraged renovations and conversions of existing buildings currently on the tract that might meet the Seminary's student housing needs with no new construction thus required on the Westwood Tract. Among these scenarios was the renovation of the Rice Building (the U-shaped brick structure on Westwood Avenue) and the purchase the old Richmond Memorial Nursing Dorm which currently sits empty along the Lamont Avenue curb.

We therefore approached our June 12 exercise as an opportunity to mitigate to the extent possible, the impact that a housing development on the Westwood Tract would have on both the tract and the neighborhood as a whole. Following is a summary of the discussions during, and conclusions reached as a result of our work session:

- The Seminary noted that none of the existing structures would fit its needs with regard to "new" housing, and that the nursing dorm would be too remote from their campus, once they sell all of their property located west of Brook Road (the block that now houses Veritas School).
- The only alternative which seems available then is to take UPS's initial plan for the Westwood Tract, and with the valuable feedback learned from our many concerned neighbors, try to improve upon it, while keeping the size of the project and its impact on the site as small as possible. This would permit UPS to gain the married student housing it needs, and hopefully, a means by which to keep itself viable for years to come. We think our fellow residents will agree when we say that a healthy Seminary is an important component of a healthy neighborhood.
- According to Douglas Cole, the City planner's comments to him regarding the original plan mirrored our concerns to the point that Doug commented that the two parties must have shared notes (I can assure you, we have not). City planning staff also noted that although this area of the city has not been master planned through a form-based approach as some areas such as the riverfront have, they would still use form-based practices in their review of the project when it is submitted. This is important because form-based planning puts a great deal of emphasis on the manner in which new structures relate to existing ones in form and appearance, not just use. Form-based codes address the relationship between building facades and the public realm,

the form and mass of buildings in relation to one another, and the scale and types of streets and blocks. Unlike our current use-based zoning code, they are keyed to a regulating plan that designates the appropriate form and scale (and therefore, character) of development, rather than only distinctions in land-use types.

- Given the realities noted above, we came away feeling rather encouraged by the overall progress made at the work session. The major accomplishments were as follows:
 - A number of general planning objectives were agreed to, including locating the larger, taller buildings along and close to the Westwood sidewalk from, roughly, the current location of the Rice Building, east to Brook Road, with only two-story buildings along the Brook frontage, maintaining "front yards" compatible with those across the street, and ALL the parking interior to the block, not along the public streets and sidewalks.
 - The combined working group (our task group as well as UPS and its design team) is continuing to work to establish a plan which would preserve as much open space as possible (including the walking track/vita course, Chrysalis Outdoor Labyrinth, and the historic McGuire House). This area runs roughly from Westwood on the north to the Loxley / Rennie intersection on the south, and from just west of the McGuire house westward to the Loxley curb.
 - The eighty-seven free standing houses along Rennie Avenue and Loxley Road, in the manner as presented to us in March, are now off the table. UPS indicated a willingness to work with the neighborhood over as much as a two-year period to find a financial means by which to keep as much of the open space on the western portion of the site bordering Loxley Road intact.
 - It is the opinion of the task group that the only way to assure ourselves that this western portion of the site will not be developed eventually is to take the property out of the development picture by purchasing it from UPS. This could involve one or more financial vehicles, such as a special tax district through which the City would purchase the property over time, or through the use of some of the real estate tax revenue that will be realized from the apartment development, or a combination of the two, among other possibilities.
 - Veritas School came to the table advocating for this open space as well, which the school envisions as a shared complex including a sports field, tennis courts, walking track and other possible recreational uses, comprising up to 10 acres of the Westwood Tract land. Veritas also revealed that it now has a contract to buy the old Nursing School Dorm located at Lamont and Palmyra for expansion of its campus, and is currently negotiating with the owner of the property between Lamont Avenue and the Ginter Place condo building to purchase that property, which would result in a unified campus of 17 acres for the school.
 - Tree preservation, particularly of the large mature trees near Westwood and Loxley, as well as south near Rennie was also a major topic of discussion. It may be helpful to get the neighborhood tree stewards actively involved in this work.
 - Meanwhile, both the Historic Richmond Foundation and the State Department of Historic Resources have expressed a great deal of interest in the future of the McGuire House. Several of our task group members are currently working with these two groups as well. Among the possible options are developing it into a public or private function space in its current location, or relocating it elsewhere on the site along one of the side streets for sale as a renovated private home.

- Perhaps most encouraging was gaining an understanding of the level of quality the developer, Bristol Development Group proposes, the description of their desired high-end renter demographic, and the fact that at least two thirds of the units will be two-bedroom units of a quality capable of being converted to owner-occupied (condo) units at some future date. This is important because the Seminary noted that it could ultimately buy-out the project in the future after the financing is stabilized in order to assure its long-term control over the development. Their target demographic are renters who have the means to choose where they live, such as the empty-nester individual or couple wanting to live in a stable, established neighborhood without the hassle of maintenance and yard work. Bristol also noted that their projects emphasize the use of brick and other long-term exterior materials over those often used in lower-cost construction.

All of this is subject to our seeing what plan the Seminary's consultant team brings back to the table in late July. At that time, we will have a better idea of the valuation of the western portion of the tract so we can begin to work in more detail on its long-term preservation. Of course, the Task Group will keep both neighborhoods updated as the plan develops through our association newsletters, Yahoo Groups and when appropriate, public meetings.

Stephen Weisensale, AIA, CSI
Chair, GPRA Planning & Zoning Cmte
Zoning@historicginterpark.org

In addition to the Task Group comments noted above the Seminary's attorney offered the following comments upon completion of the work session.

As a summary of the discussions with the task force, the Seminary has committed to working with the task force in revising the proposed development plan for the Westwood Tract balancing the needs of the Seminary with the community desires for the property. The Seminary views the development of the property as a means to achieve three goals: provide new, high quality family housing for its students; provide a financial return from the development to support the new housing to further fund the endowment of the Seminary; and, to continue its 100+ years of positive neighborhood relations. A third party land planner provided a general development design based on comments from the parties. The Seminary, City of Richmond and Task Force discussed the general plan, the goals of each party, with the underlying fact that the property is zoned R-53, and ideas on how to revise the development to meet as many goals of all parties as possible.

This information is being used by the Seminary's team to revise the development plan for the eastern portion of the property and create a proposal for the western portion of the property to be presented to the task force at the end of July, subject to scheduling. Following this discussion, the Seminary will present the revised plan to the community as a whole.

*Thank you,
Jennifer Mullen*

*Jennifer D. Mullen, Esq.
Roth Doner Jackson Gibbons Conklin, PLC
919 E. Main Street, Suite 2110
Richmond, Virginia 23219-4625*