

FR: Monsignor Kevin C. Lawrence, Pastor Saint John the Baptist

RE: "Opening Statement & Response to Community Questions / Manayunk Neighborhood Council Meeting March 22, 2017."

DATE: 25 April 2017

March 22, 2017 Meeting Opening Remarks

On behalf of the Parish of Saint John the Baptist, I express my appreciation for all of the important work that the Manayunk Neighborhood Council and the North Light Community Center conduct on behalf of the Manayunk/Roxborough community; and in particular for children of our community. Your service to the community has been important in seeing that Manayunk remains a wonderful Philadelphia neighborhood to work, live, and enjoy. Quite simply, a strong and vibrant Manayunk that is a welcoming place to live is absolutely essential for the future of the Parish.

In this context I express the values that have guided the parish as we have dealt with the tremendously painful issue of the suppression, relegation and disposition of the Saint Mary of the Assumption property on Conarroe and Carson Streets. In a March 2016 pastoral letter to the people of Saint John the Baptist I informed them that an agreement of sale had been executed for the property.

Then and now, I and the members of the parish real estate committee were convinced that the buyer shared our overarching desire that any redevelopment plan must be in the best interests of not only the Parish, but the larger Manayunk community as well. Quite simply, this sale is critical to the future the Parish and its ability to carry out its historical mission to its parishioners and the larger community.

Accordingly, after much consideration the parish real estate committee selected a well-regarded local developer with a long history of responsible development and the financial resources to complete the project. Even before the proposal to designate the Property historic, the buyer was adamant that he would preserve St. Mary's architecture and seek a sensitive adaptive reuse of the former church building and school building. His architect is highly regarded in the historical preservation community with a philosophy that emphasizes community engagement. Similarly, the redevelopment of the vacant parking area was to be done in a manner sympathetic in scale, scope and use to the surrounding neighbors that included ample parking for the entire redevelopment project while at the same time minimizing traffic circulation impacts.

While I appreciate the legitimate concerns that you have raised, it remains our belief that overall the current plan, while certainly not perfect, is in the best interests of the community and strikes the right balance among the property's various development considerations and constituents.

It remains my hope that ultimately we can all work together on the future of this critical part of the neighborhood. I appreciate the opportunity now to formally introduce the developer and his team to the community: Jack Bienenfeld and American Living Concepts of Manayunk.

Community Meeting

22 March 2017

Msgr. Kevin C. Lawrence, Pastor Saint John the Baptist Church

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Why didn't the Archdiocese agree to sell the parking lot for community and North Light parking? To my knowledge there was no real offer.

What did the Church know about the change in zoning when they accepted the bid? Did the church know about the proposed 'spot zoning'?

Our realtor informed the parish shortly before it was made public. Actually, the choice of developer was based on the fact that the proposed plans would have required little or no change to local zoning ordinances. As I understand it, the need for a change in zoning occurred after the evaluation of the land during the normal due diligence period when significant subsurface fill issues challenged the original plans and greatly limited development options for the site. The developer could have walked away from the agreement of sale but did not. Frankly, without the determination and vision of the developer, this property could remain vacant and useless to both the parish and community for years to come since neither has the resources to address the critical subsurface fill concerns. (FYI: There were other bids for the property that were declined because they would have required changes in current zoning that could have led to a long litigious struggle to develop the property.)

Did the Agreement of Sale include the provision that approval of multi-family apartments would have to be secured for the sale to be completed?

No.

Why was North Light not allowed to purchase a piece of land as they attempted to do, for their parking needs? Subsequently, why was a provision for parking spaces for North Light not included in the 'Conditions of Sale'?

As I mentioned previously, to my knowledge a real offer for any of the parcels was never offered. Also, a provision for parking for NL was never a condition of sale of the property and there was never promise to make it a condition of sale. However, long before a developer was selected, the board at North Light and I did have a conversation about potentially using an area or parcel of the lot for NL parking needs. I did offer to keep the needs of NL at the forefront of sale discussions. Both our realtor and the parish have attempted to do this in all our conversations with the buyer. Because of this, NL and the developer have had conversations about the matter. I am hopeful that both of these parties can come to a common understanding and agreement.

The scope of the proposals was too large for the location and required too much parking. Why was the development allowed when it was not in keeping with the Church's principles of protecting the community's interests?

I am not sure what the questioner means by the "Church's principal of protecting community interest." However, there are a number of social justice principles such as "The Principle of Solidarity" and "The Principle of the Common Good" contained in Church teaching that do relate to the question.

Solidarity states that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they live. We are one human family. Learning to practice the virtue of solidarity means learning that 'loving our neighbor' has global dimensions in an interdependent world. The principle of solidarity leads to choices that will promote and protect the common good. Solidarity calls us to respond not simply to personal, individual misfortunes; there are societal issues that cry out for more just social structures. For this reason the Church calls its members today not only to engage in charitable works but also to work towards social justice and systemic change.

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The principal of the common good is understood as the social conditions that allow people to reach their full human potential and to realize their human dignity which is the bedrock principal of Catholic social teaching.

Because it is so fundamental to this point, it is important to also understand the principal of Dignity of the Human Person, namely, that every human being is created in the image of God and redeemed by Jesus Christ, and therefore is invaluable and worthy of respect as a member of the human family. Every person – regardless of race, sex, age, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, employment or economic status, health, intelligence, achievement or any other differentiating characteristic – is worthy of respect. It is not what you do or what you have that gives you a claim on respect; it is simply being human that establishes your dignity.

Given that dignity, the human person is, in the Catholic view, never a means, always an end. The body of Catholic social teaching begins with the human person, but it does not end there. Individuals have dignity; but individualism has no place in Catholic social thought. The principle of human dignity gives the human person a claim on membership in a community, the human family. Therefore, any of the social conditions the Church has in mind presuppose respect for the person, the social well-being and development of the group and the public authority's maintenance of peace and security.

What constitutes the common good can be a matter for debate, but the absence of sensitivity to the common good is a sure sign of decay in a society. As a sense of community is eroded, concern for the common good declines. A proper communitarian concern is the antidote to unbridled individualism, which, like unrestrained selfishness in personal relations, can destroy balance, harmony and peace within and among groups, neighborhoods, regions and nations.

Locally, sensitivity to the common good and proper concern are historically present in cooperation with and in service on behalf of individuals and organizations in the community regardless of creedal beliefs is a hallmark of this parish. Certainly, the Catholic communities in the Manayunk, Roxborough and Wissahickon neighborhoods has served this community by way of its multiple ministries and outreach efforts throughout its 163 year history at Saint Mary of the Assumption. This spirit of service continues today in the community through Saint John the Baptist Church and other Catholic parishes.

In fact, that the Catholic community has often cared for and supported the most needy and vulnerable in the community often without any cost to individuals, organizations and the neighborhood. The positive spiritual and practical impact of the Church on the local community and the dignity of the human person are incalculable.

Sadly, this all seems to be forgotten when neighbors can so easily stand and accuse the same Catholic community of being greedy, immoral and lacking concern for the community and its members. In contrast to this perception, proceeds from any sale of the property at Saint Mary of the Assumption will continue to support the Church's full mission in the parish and the community, contribute to the care of others and the development and support of programs that will respect human dignity, help the individual's quality of life and spiritual growth. We do this not because we benefit from it but because others in the community benefit from it. It is constitutive of who we are as the Catholic Church.

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Finally, while I appreciate the legitimate concerns that members of the community have raised in the face of this possible redevelopment, it remains my belief that overall the current development plan as presented can have a positive impact on the community. I am sure you know that not all at the March 22 community meeting actually live in the Manayunk neighborhood. I do live here, albeit for only three years. I also have experienced the discomfort and annoyance of sitting in traffic on Green Lane, Main Street and multiple other two way one lane streets that the community tolerates. All in all, I consider this a part of living in a great city neighborhood and I do not blur the line between a momentary inconvenience and a diminished dignity as a human being or the community. It may not be true for all but the daily discomforts of living in community with others have not lessened me as a person or my ability to function effectively in the community and on behalf of the parish and neighborhood. In the long run any redevelopment may also bring with it possibilities for community growth and quality of life improvements we all seem to agree are needed.

Does Saint John's have the final say or does this have to go to the Archdiocese? If it's your parishioners and your real estate committee supporting this, where are they tonight?

The parish is bound by the universal norms of the Church. As such all temporal goods in the Church are ecclesiastical goods and are governed by Canon Law. This means that all parish property is controlled by the parish (in the person of the pastor), and its civil incorporation reflects that reality. Since parish pastoral councils and finance councils do not have the same range of financial oversight that other denominational vestries exercise, the oversight of the Ordinary (local bishop) regarding some parish transactions (ones over a certain dollar amount) is the insurance that parish resources are being administered properly. Therefore, parishes need the permission of the Ordinary and his finance council to spend funds over a certain amount, which usually means that the purchase and sale of buildings would require the ordinary's permission equally. This requirement is meant to protect parishes from a pastor spending large amounts of parish funds without any check or oversight. Therefore, parish management of goods and ownership of property is never completely independent from the oversight of the ordinary because that oversight is required by canon law – though the parish's day to day administration is conducted on the parish level and is controlled by the pastor with the advice of his finance council.

Why was the Church not 'evangelizing for the community' and instead supporting this development?

As people of faith, we do not believe that ownership of material goods, including property, is an absolute right. All material goods are seen as the goods of creation and for the good of all. Saint Mary of the Assumption is private property and the reason why the parish acquired this property throughout its history was to serve others with it. As long as the need continued justification of ownership and use of the property endured. That is to say that the right to this property doesn't extend past the time we can use it effectively in the service of others. For the Church to hold onto this property now would be nothing short of hoarding or even wasting a created good. The fact is Saint John the Baptist neither has need of the property for the fulfilment of its mission nor can it maintain the property of Saint Mary of the Assumption. This is a clear sign that we need to divest ourselves of the property.

The "evangelizing" that you mention is a broad term but ultimately we understand it refers to the spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior of the world. As I

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stated previously, the church does this through a number of ways. Service to others in the community regardless of their creed is a very recognizable hallmark of the Church. Certainly, the Catholic community has served this neighborhood for many years and will continue to do so. To do this effectively over time does require changes. While I do not necessarily agree with the position that the redevelopment of Saint Mary of the Assumption will not be good for the community, I do know that to try and hold on to the property and not to dispose of it in a way that is fair and just for the parish would place an undue burden on the parish, possibly jeopardize the sustainability of the parish and waste resources that should be directed toward the work of evangelization and caring for others.

Has the church sold the Port Royal property? That would be a viable income for Saint Johns. Talk to the neighbors on Port Royal Ave about apartments.

No the parish has not sold the Property on Port Royal Avenue and has no intention to do so. We have spent the last two years successfully appealing the City's Board of Revision of Taxes and Property Assessments which placed undue tax burden on the parish because the property was grossly over assessed several years ago. For the record, because of its history and the quality of the ground, only a very small part of the property is suitable for construction and therefore is of much less value than is generally believed by the public.

Why was the church allowing this development, which would make parking much more difficult for existing neighbors? The questioner said he was 'tired of being a prisoner in his own neighborhood' because of the lack of parking.

The reason the parish is selling the property has been answered in a previously. Adding to that is a statement made at the community meeting which I agree with, "Public parking is the responsibility of the City."

At Dobson elementary school, we have to choose between a dean of students or a music program. The church is making money, the developer is making money, and the city is making money, why doesn't my daughter have a language class, why is the school yard cement. How much is the church going to give back to our schools?

While this question did come up during the time of my Q&A session, it was clearly directed towards the public officials in the audience who I believe responded to it. I also agree that public education like other public services is the responsibility of the City and not the parish, a private entity. Of course, the church like other land/home owners does pay taxes which go to the services provided by the City to its citizens. If the redevelopment of this property increases the local tax base, wouldn't that also help with funding for public education? Currently, for parish families who participate in our parish scholarship program, the parish does contribute to the education of its own members who attend nearby parochial schools. Finally, it is my firm hope that someday our public officials and policies will recognize the long history and value of parochial education in our local communities and provide the means to support its reemergence again.

In 1976 MNC was able to unilaterally decide that there was not going to be any new development. In forty one years, how did we go from complete autonomy to complete anonymity where what we say doesn't matter.

This is more a statement than a question requiring an answer.

I'm being forced out. I don't want to move. How does the community benefit from this? Where is the revenue for our roads, our playgrounds and our children? Maybe if somebody offered us something we wouldn't be so upset.

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Much of what is mentioned here is the City's responsibility and better directed to public officials or was answered by the developer during a separate Q&A session.

Will the Church commit that the sale will not go through if there is no parking provision included for North Light Community Center?

You are looking for a simple answer that would only serve to polarize two community organizations that respect if not support each other's mission. As I mentioned in my opening statement, "On behalf of the Parish of Saint John the Baptist, I register my appreciation for all of the important work that the Manayunk Neighborhood Council and the North Light Community Center conduct on behalf of the Manayunk/Roxborough community; and in particular for children of our community. Your service to the community has been important in seeing that Manayunk remains a wonderful Philadelphia neighborhood to work, live, and enjoy. Quite simply, a strong and vibrant Manayunk that is a welcoming place to live is absolutely essential for the future of the Parish." I believe this statement and I believe in North Light. Maybe all of us who say we value this organization have to dig a little deeper in our hearts and pockets and help a little or a lot more by volunteering or giving more generously. I can assure you that my support of North Light is not contingent on their ability to provide parking but on the good works they do and the children and families they help.

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