

Future convenience store in Mt. Vernon faces controversy

By: Dan Furman, The Johns Hopkins Newsletter, December 4, 2008

Idyllic Mount Vernon Place, home to the Johns Hopkins Peabody Institute, the Walters Art museum and the striking neo-Gothic United Methodist church, could soon have a new neighbor.

The owner of the now vacant property on the corner of Charles and Center streets has entered into an agreement to lease the property for 35 years to 7-Eleven.

While Peabody students may relish the idea of having a 3 a.m.-taquito just a short walk away, some in the community fear that it will be a detriment to both the historic character and overall security of the area.

But the owner of the property, Gregory Friedman, asserted that it would provide essential services to seniors living at a nearby senior center and additionally be a great convenience to Peabody students.

"We continue to want to put what's best for the community within the space, the community organization does not necessarily speak for the whole community," Friedman said.

The proposed 24-hour 7-Eleven would become the only retail establishment within Mt. Vernon Place, one of only four areas in Maryland to have been designated as a National Historic Landmark District. From an economic standpoint, this troubles many residents of the area.

"Its low end use, an indication that you are dealing at bottom of economic chain," Paul Warren, chair of the Development and Zoning Committee for the Mount Vernon-Belvedere Association, said. "[This development is] emblematic of economic times. A prime location like that, you would look to get a high end use. 7-Eleven is not high end retail."

The Mount Vernon-Belvedere Association initiated an emergency fundraising drive in an attempt to buy the property from the current owner after the plans to locate a 7-Eleven became known.

According to Warren, his association was able to raise \$300 thousand in three weeks and made an offer of \$450 thousand for the property which was turned down by the owner.

Of the money raised by the community association, \$93 thousand came from cash-strapped Baltimore City, which Warren took as an indication that those outside the community see the proposed development as potentially detrimental to the community.

"For community, this is not going to be the type of place which is going to draw investment," Warren said.

This sentiment was echoed by City Councilman William Cole. His 11th District includes Mt. Vernon Place.

"[The Mt. Vernon] neighborhood is one of Baltimore's true gems. You want to preserve your historical neighborhoods as best you can, and it's been one of the reasons people are moving from D.C.," Cole said.

There are no current laws which prohibit retail usage in Mt. Vernon Place. The only restrictions will be on signage, which Warren said would only amount to no "big Slurpy" advertising the location of the 7-Eleven.

Addressing these concerns that the 7-Eleven would indelibly alter the character of the area, Friedman, the owner 7-Eleven's proposed home, contended that these fears have been exaggerated.

"[The Mt. Vernon-Belvedere Association] jumped to conclusion as to what appearance would be without realizing how it could be integrated into the historic fabric of the community," Friedman said.

According to Friedman, some of the community association's resistance was because the 7-Eleven would stymie its long-held desire to turn the space into a visitor's center.

Cole intends to introduce legislation this Thursday aimed at curtailing some aspects of the development. His bill will propose that no convenience store may operate between the hours of 11 p.m. and 5 a.m. in a landmark district.

While some in the community association acknowledge that opening a 24-hour convenience store in the area around Peabody is economically viable, Steven Shen, an area resident and chair of the Architectural Review board of the Mt. Vernon-Belvedere Association, contended that the area would require increased policing because of its presents.

"[Drug] dealers and clients, as well as prostitutes and johns may be frequenting this store," Shen said.

Members of the community association asserted that the city's planned 300-bed homeless shelter on the 600 block of Fallsway, three blocks east of the proposed 7-Eleven location, was a potential security factor which concerned them.

"Students and seniors would use it during normal business hours, after midnight it's a whole other cast of characters that frequent this store," Shen said.

Despite the fears which the 7-Eleven has engendered in some, opposition to the store is not monolithic in the community.

"I have heard from Peabody students who want the convenience of having a place to buy cigarettes after the bars close," Cole said.

Currently, the nearest 24-hour convenience store to Peabody, which is a 7-Eleven, is five blocks

away. Some perceive this as a potentially unsafe situation.

"If, after having a couple of beers a Peabody student wants to get some cigarettes late at night, they would have to walk through some areas which they would otherwise probably not want to be in," Friedman said.

Thus far Peabody's administration has remained neutral on the proposed 7-Eleven development.

"Peabody did not and does not support the [vacant space on the corner of Charles and Center streets] being occupied by a 7-Eleven. However, neither are we opposed to it," Jeffery Sharkey, director of the Peabody Institute, wrote in an e-mail to a concerned resident of Mt. Vernon, which was shared with the News-Letter.

But several sources contended that the property owner contacted Peabody early in his negotiations with 7-Eleven and that the position it took allowed for the negotiations to proceed.

"The main reason [the property owner] moved forward with 7-Eleven is because Peabody did not object," Cole said.

Others also spoke of what they perceive to be Peabody and Hopkins's tacit support for the development.

"Peabody won't go on record, but a percentage of staff views it as positive for the student body," Friedman said.

A spokesman for Peabody stated that the administration is aware that some people in the community opposed the opening of a 7-Eleven and would meet with the Mt. Vernon-Belvedere Association to hear more about their concerns.

According to Friedman, leasing the property to 7-Eleven is not a done deal.

"We're continuing to work through the issue and address any and all issues raised by community and city and all other interested parties," he said.

In a statement provided by Peabody, it "will continue to cooperate with the area's cultural preservation and economic development organizations and with the City [on the] sometimes different approaches regarding the legitimate uses of the neighborhood's buildings and parks."

However, as in past instances, some characterized Hopkins and Peabody's attitude as aloof and detached from the community.

"If you start thinking that you are just bare buildings and not part of the community, that is when you start to have problems," Cole said.