

THE NORTHWEST CURRENT

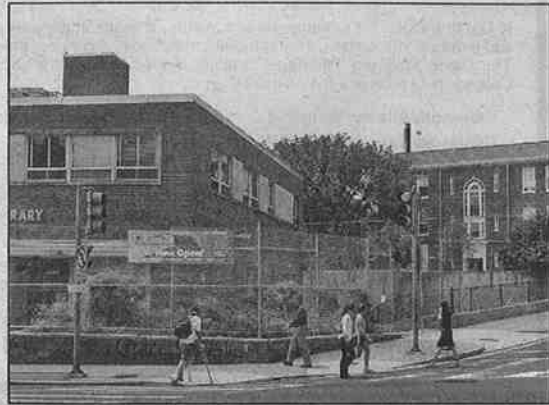
Tenley residents ponder partnership

By **KATIE PEARCE**
Current Staff Writer

Residents crowded into a church basement at last week's Tenleytown-American University Park advisory neighborhood commission meeting to ponder a potentially controversial development deal that would renovate the aging Janney Elementary School and rebuild the shuttered Tenley-Friendship Neighborhood Library.

Under the proposed public-private partnership, Roadside Development would build a four- or five-story residential building — probably a condominium, according to Armond Spikell, a principal at the firm — above the new library and on a small portion of the school's land, as well as a shared underground parking lot beneath both properties. Profits from the development would be used to fund the upgrades to the school and a new library.

Roadside has already carved a foothold in the area
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Bill Petros/The Current

Roadside Development is proposing a public-private partnership that would include a residential building above a new library and on a small portion of Janney Elementary School's land.

PROJECT

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through the 2004 Cityline project, which converted the former Sears building at Wisconsin Avenue and Albemarle Street into a mixed-use retail and luxury condominium building that now houses the huge electronics store, Best Buy.

The latest proposal has generated praise from smart-growth advocates and many in the Janney community, but also a fair share of skepticism from people concerned about the project's complexity and unknown variables.

In an e-mail to The Current, neighborhood commissioner Carolyn Sherman emphasized the project's long-term impact. "Disposing of public land is a big decision, with ramifications for our school and library that will last decades," she wrote.

According to Sherman, the decision is one "that can't be rushed, and there's no need to rush."

But others have suggested the timing is more urgent because the D.C. Public Library system is moving forward with independent plans to reconstruct the library at 4450 Wisconsin Ave., which closed in December 2004 for renovations that have yet to begin.

According to the library's spokesperson, Monica Lewis, the library has set aside more than \$16 million for the reconstruction and is planning for a March 2010 reopening.

from parents, he acknowledged that "there's a lot of varied opinions."

Andra Tamburro, a Janney parent and member of the Coalition To Stop Tenleytown Overdevelopment, said some at the school seem willing to jump aboard the proposal without investigating its financial intricacies. "There are people at Janney ... who want to push this forward as fast as possible," she said.

"It's such a negative place to be in if you voice any discontent," said another Janney parent, who asked to remain anonymous.

While Roadside clearly outlined its plans for Janney at the meeting held in a community room of St. Mary's Church, ideas for the library are somewhat cloudier. According to Spikell, "the school actually spelled out what [its] needs are," while the desired library facilities are more conceptual at this stage.

At present, the Roadside proposal calls for a 19,000-square-foot, two- or three-story facility with possible rooftop garden space, with setback residential units above the library. Parking for the library would be available in the underground lot shared with Janney.

The restricted air space — and the library's subsequent inability to expand in the future — poses a problem for some.

"Once you build on top of the library's land ... the library is hemmed in," pointed out Martha Saccocio, president of the Friends of the Tenley-Friendship Library.

Fawell, a retired real estate developer and lawyer who lives in Tenleytown. The opportunity will be lost "unless the leaders get organized," Fawell suggested at the meeting, to a round of applause.

In an interview, Fawell said, "These transactions are very complicated and ... require dealmakers." He said that he left the meeting with the impression that "people seemed to be wandering around in a fog."

For many, details of the project's financing are particularly confusing.

According to Spikell, two sources of funds — the value of the air rights over the library, and the real estate taxes from the new residences — would finance the library and school projects, excess parking and an undetermined portion of affordable housing.

The project would potentially follow the same mechanism used at the Oyster Bilingual Elementary School — a payment in lieu of taxes, or PILOT, in which a portion of the real property taxes due from the new residences could go toward bond payments to cover part of the library and school improvements. The risks involved with such a bond, Spikell said, are "pretty low."

Whether the air rights and the bond together would be enough to cover all the costs of the library, school, parking and some affordable housing "has yet to be determined," wrote Spikell in an e-mail to The Current.

The distribution of the finances also remains uncertain.