

THE NORTHWEST CURRENT

ANC committee vets plan for public-private project

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The largest community meeting to date on a developer's proposal to put housing on top of the Tenley library while providing funds for its modernization Monday evening found no consensus on the controversial "public-private partnership." And, there was little indication at the meeting of how the decision-making process will proceed.

"We still have so many questions," said Anne Sullivan of the Tenleytown-American University Park advisory neighborhood commission, which convened the meeting at St. Columba's Episcopal Church to share findings from a monthlong evaluation of the Roadside Development proposal.

A seven-page report makes clear the neighborhood commission is unhappy with the plan, in which the developer would also help with the planned reconstruction of Janney Elementary School.

A representative of the deputy mayor for economic development and planning said his office tentatively supports the project. But he explained that the office has not yet

determined whether the project should be competitively bid or awarded to Roadside on a "sole source" basis, or whether the site at Wisconsin Avenue and Albemarle Street should be sold to Roadside or leased.

"We need to answer those questions ASAP," said staffer Eric Scott.

Roadside, which developed the Cityline at Tenley condominium on top of the old Sears building across Albemarle Street from the library, is still fine-tuning its unusual proposal. Partner Armond Spikell said joint development of the school, library and residential addition seems like "an elegant solution."

Putting parking underground means there will be "no net loss" of space for either facility, Spikell said. "It's an opportunity that will be lost" if reconstruction of the now-closed library branch proceeds with only District funds, he said.

A special committee chaired by Sullivan has had four meetings to evaluate the implications for what she called "two vital anchors of our community." Sullivan said the committee has not reached a conclusion, but the tone of her report was decid-

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edly negative. City officials and several people in the large audience challenged some of the conclusions.

For example, Sullivan said the Roadside proposal would result in an addition to Janney large enough to accommodate a total of only 347 students, while the school system is planning "a fully modernized facility to meet current educational standards for 550 students." Janney currently enrolls 485 students, with demand expected to grow.

"This plan is based on land values, not education needs," Sullivan said, "Clearly it's not a proposal oriented toward a school of 550."

But Kimberly Driggins of the school system's Office of Strategic Funding Opportunities said Roadside's initial unsolicited proposal was based on incorrect numbers. With or without Roadside's involvement, she said, school officials will insist on a facility adequate to serve 550 children. "Roadside is trying to understand the school's needs," Driggins said. "Those numbers will change."

On the site of the now-closed branch library, Sullivan said library officials are planning a new structure with 20,000 square feet on each of two floors and do not like Roadside's plan for a slightly larger library on three floors. With funding allocated and an architect already selected, she said Roadside involvement would "certainly delay" the long-awaited library reconstruction.

"We're being asked to sell off a public asset and delay reconstruction of a library that's already funded," the commissioner said.

But Archie Williams, a public library staffer, said there are "too many variables" to determine the impact of the Roadside plan on the library's schedule. Demolition is about to begin, he said, and the library system will announce the name of its architect soon. But community meetings that will help determine the design of the library

have not yet even begun.

The idea of a public-private redevelopment of the library and school, first floated before the current library was closed, polarized the Tenleytown community several years ago. Opinions still seemed sharply divided at the meeting Monday night.

"It's insane to give away land to a developer to get a public school that the city is obligated to provide," said one woman who queued up to speak. "Where's the organized opposition?" she asked, pledging to join it.

John Ritchotte, a parent at St. Ann's School next to the library, said Roadside has ignored the needs of the parochial school and church. He said construction of a larger library and routing of cars behind the school "will have a very negative impact" on St. Ann's students.

Scott Cartland, Janney's principal, made a strong plea for the deal. He said fear that play space at Janney would be eliminated is a "red herring." He said land lost from the school's soccer field would be offset by the placement of parking underground and removal of temporary classrooms from the school's parking lot. "Out of this, we're hoping for a sizable addition. We're actually going to gain play space," Cartland said.

Ward 3 D.C. Council member Mary Cheh has convened her own meetings on the proposal, and she said the commission presentation was "not sufficiently objective."

"To me the question is always, 'What is the value added?'" Cheh said at the end of the meeting. "This concept will hasten the time Janney is modernized, with a bigger library, parking underground and a chance to develop that corner in a way it deserves," she said, noting the key location directly across the street from Metro. "I hope the community sees it as a great opportunity and seizes it."

Sullivan said the commission will schedule another meeting for Sept. 17. "Isn't that too late?" somebody in the audience asked.