

Justifiable Dissent

To the Editor:

The Committee to Save St. Paul's believes that the public meetings of the Board of Trustees are just that...public meetings at which the public is invited to speak during two public comment sessions. As Trustee Lamberti pointed out at the February 7 meeting, "This government serves the people well when it permits democracy in action." While we appreciate former mayor Hal Hecken's call to let the Mayor's Committee and the Board move forward, we hope that the Mayor, the Board and the Mayor's Committee understand the necessity of bringing the community into the process in a meaningful way.

Mr. Hecken's letter is troubling for many reasons, not the least of which are the many factual errors that attempt to depict the Committee to Save St. Paul's, and our supporters as obstructionists who have "attacked" the MOU, Avalon Bay and one of the trustees. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our comments and public statements have been an attempt to get the public involved and ask tough questions before we end up with a "solution" that nobody saw coming and nobody wants. To date, the process has been cloaked in mystery and vague, unfulfilled promises. Like Trustee Lamberti, we want full disclosure and transparency. CSSP has always encouraged residents to ask questions and speak out on their own. The Mayor, the Mayor's Committee, the Board of Trustees and AvalonBay can be assured that if CSSP's asking questions, if we're looking on the Internet for answers, many others in the community are doing the same thing.

In Mr. Hecken's letter he stated that "one of the reasons the selection process was delayed was a lawsuit against the village initiated by members of CSSP which was dismissed by the Court." A lawsuit did take place BEFORE the RFP was ever released and the selection of a conditional developer began. It was brought by members of the CSSP to determine if the village had the authority to pre-survey developers about a "sale" of the land for condominium use. St. Paul's property was and still is a "public trust" and under that designation cannot be "sold" without first receiving the necessary state legislation. The Court ruled that the village could go ahead with the survey, and the RFP was released.

It was stated that "CSSP received over 6 months of time extensions from the Mayor's Committee on St. Paul's to refine their proposal." Mr. Hecken does not mention that Avalon Bay and the Albanese organization were given the same extensions, all necessary to respond to the avalanche of questions from the Village's consultant. Anyone who has read the response documents and correspondence between AvalonBay and Karen Backus Associates/the Mayor's Committee on file in the public library will find that AvalonBay was also responding to further questions. AvalonBay was asked on numerous occasions and through telephone conversations to refine their proposal during the months from October 2006 when the proposals were filed to May 2007. CSSP/Canus was not the only responder given extensions to refine their proposal.

It was stated that "when the Board of Trustees reviewed [the CSSP] proposal and compared it to the AvalonBay submission, not one trustee voted for the Canus/CSSP plan." To CSSP's knowledge, the FULL Board of Trustees was never privy to ALL the information received from

the responders, so ALL of the members of the Board never had a chance to review and compare the submissions. The Mauk Committee's recommendation presented for a vote in October 2007 called for the designation of AvalonBay and the elimination of CSSP/Canus. That was the ONLY vote taken publicly by the FULL Board of Trustees, and the vote was 5-3. Three trustees voted NO on the Mauk Committee's recommendation. Those trustees complained at the time that the process had been too secretive and they wanted more time to review the proposal.

It was stated that "the plan then was to 'work together' with the Village to develop an acceptable MOU with AvalonBay." The CSSP executive committee met with AvalonBay at their request on only one occasion following Avalon's designation, and that meeting took place on November 15. Their goal was to enlist our support. CSSP listened to the Avalon presentation and saw the photographs of the Danvers, MA, project. We expressed our reservations about the amount of new construction, placement of community space, and the lack of details of their plan. Avalon listened. [CSSP believes we speak for many residents who continue to be concerned about over-building on the St. Paul's site. This is not attacking. As Mr. Lamberti said, it is justifiable dissent, and if the solution is to stifle it or ignore it, this plan will never go forward.] On November 15, CSSP and AvalonBay didn't engage in what people would call "discussion." Avalon made no plans to contact us further, and hasn't contacted us since. No one from the Mayor's Committee contacted the CSSP to discuss any part of the St. Paul's matter. When people wish to 'work together,' there usually are meetings held, exchange of ideas, discussion about what could work and what wouldn't for each party, people compromise, and in the end, working together produces a plan that is acceptable to each party (and in this case, hopefully the broader community). That hasn't happened.

The CSSP still believes that St. Paul's can be preserved and saved for future generations. We still believe that true historic preservation can be accomplished; we still believe that significant community space can be placed in the main building. We are heartened that the rental apartment proposal put forth by AvalonBay, which mirrors our own proposal in key ways, will keep the property under village control. We, as well as many other residents, want to make sure that the community receives the proper financial benefits. We hope that the Garden City community can get together behind a final proposal that can be embraced in broad support. As we've said before, let's do it right! Avoiding the tough questions, Mr. Hecken, will not produce a satisfactory result.

The Executive Committee
Of the Committee to Save St. Paul's