

We're still waiting

To the Editor

The most recent edition of Village Facts, entitled "Designating a Developer for St. Paul's," presents a great deal of opinion and rhetoric, but in the end, it fails dismally in its explanation of why the Village Board conditionally designated AvalonBay to redevelop the Historic St. Paul's Main Building. Without having a well defined plan and timeline for moving forward toward the goal of saving the Historic Main Building for the benefit of the public, the Village Board has opened the door for disaster. The Executive Committee of the Committee to Save St. Paul's sorely hopes that the solution doesn't become as elusive as the process. Despite repeated promises that the public would be kept involved and informed, we are still waiting for the day when the Village finally engages in a meaningful dialogue regarding the purpose, scope, financing, and benefit to the public of the current AvalonBay plan.

As most readers of this paper know, the Committee to Save St. Paul's was formed by residents who believe that the St. Paul's property was purchased for public use, and should be preserved and dedicated to uses compatible with the Village's long-term best interests. We are the voice of the many residents and families who want to see a plan that truly preserves the Main Building, including its beautiful large parlor rooms and its Chapel, as a living monument to our Village's history. At the same time, we are the voice for those residents who believe that such historic preservation should be done for the public's benefit, and should not principally be based on a commercial developer's interest in making a profit at the public's expense. We are the voice of residents who are concerned about over-development and density, about traffic and parking problems, and the loss of precious Village green space.

With these goals in mind, we remain very concerned about the extent of the contemplated historic preservation, particularly in the interior of the building. While AvalonBay claims it will preserve the Main Building "to the extent possible," we are still waiting to see its plans and how they will affect the historic interior.

We're also very concerned that the plan will fail if it tries to completely nullify and negate the original intent of the voters in 1993, which was to preserve St. Paul's *for the public's use primarily*. Based on proof of that intent, the courts have declared that the entire St. Paul's property is held in "public trust" and that no part of it may be sold or leased to a private commercial developer without special state legislative approval. While our State Senator, Kemp Hannon, has said he would consider introducing such legislation if it is supported by a community-wide consensus, the Village is unlikely to achieve that consensus without requiring ample community space in the Historic Main Building.

We know from studies done by the Village, itself, that community groups have a need for more space, and that St. Paul's would be an ideal location. To date, however, the Village has not said whether it will require such a commitment from AvalonBay. Nor has AvalonBay been willing to put forth a detailed plan showing exactly what public space it would be willing to cede to the Village, or to detail the financial terms on which it would make such a concession. Again, we're still waiting for more information.

We're also very concerned that our trustees will fail to protect the Village from undue additional development on the property. Based on the limited information disclosed, AvalonBay wants to construct 37 townhouse units in 4-story buildings on the north side of St. Paul's. But we still have not seen detailed architectural drawings. Apart from our concern about whether the townhouses will be architecturally compatible, the sheer density of the additional development gives us pause. Let's see what's planned. Let us all see drawings and renderings. Let's hear about how many cars will be parked on the already overcrowded lots. Only then can one fairly evaluate whether additional construction is an appropriate trade-off.

Next, as village taxpayers, we are concerned that the trustees' zeal to make a deal with AvalonBay will end up being a 'give-away' of a valuable village asset. The St. Paul's Main Building and its immediate surrounding acreage [approximately 8 acres] have been valued at \$20,000,000. If St. Paul's is leased to AvalonBay for 99 years, as planned, what will the village be getting in return? If all the village gets is a pretty façade, lots of additional development, and a few dollars each year, will it be worthwhile? We're still waiting for the details.

The Board of Trustees, in the end, is charged with the responsibility for making its best judgment on how to resolve the St. Paul's conundrum, but that responsibility includes the duty to consider residents' views, legal factors, financial considerations, and the long-term interests of the Village as a whole. Regrettably, residents are still in the dark about how, as the Village Facts relates, "a measure of public sentiment will be taken." For the next several weeks, the Committee to Save St. Paul's will be placing ads in the *Garden City News* in the hope that we can promote discussion and meaningful dialogue regarding some of the key points in the redevelopment project under consideration. If the trustees are true to their word, Village residents will soon be able to attend "one or more public meetings," have "several opportunities to learn about the project proposal" and have a "full opportunity to comment on the plans," as stated in the Village Facts. But until then, we're still waiting.....

The Executive Committee of the Committee to Save St. Paul's
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and Administrative & Communications Director Maureen Traxler
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