

# UH and Magnet School Proposal

Tuesday, June 30, 2009

From: Victoria Rogers

To: Distribution

Hi, everyone.

I attended the WECA Planning and Zoning "meeting" last night up at the old Hartford College for Women site on Asylum Avenue and Elizabeth Street. This was a follow up meeting to one at which CREC (Capitol Region Education Council) discussed its desire to buy the parcel from the University of Hartford and build a magnet high school on the site.

I did not attend the first meeting, but from what I understand, CREC's plans were not well-received, thus the University of Hartford agreed to host this second meeting to answer questions raised by CREC's presentation.

The majority of attendees were from Goodwin Estates and Woodside Circle, both of which are in close proximity to the site, but there were a smattering of us from other streets including Girard, Cone, Scarborough, Elizabeth, and Oxford.

Here's the lowdown:

1. There are very few UH students/employees currently occupying the site. An early childhood program is leasing part of the campus on a short term basis while UH evaluates its options. Hartford Public Schools recently moved the high school program to its permanent home elsewhere in the city (after 5 years of occupying the site...a source of irritation to those in attendance, since the arrangement with the high school was supposed to be for one year, and the portable classrooms installed on the site that entire time still have not been removed).
2. The proceeds from any sale of the land would have to go to support "women's education" as dictated by the terms of the gift that established the Hartford College for Women. Walter Harrison, UH president, made a big deal out of this at the onset of his remarks, but by his own admission, the university has a lot of leeway in how it defines "women's education."
3. Consultants have advised the university that it will take \$5,000,000 just to address all the deferred maintenance on existing buildings. This does not include any additional costs for bringing buildings up to code (i.e., ADA compliance, etc.).
4. The same consultants concluded that the most likely use for the site would be use similar to what UH has used it for in the past: offices and/or classrooms for a neighboring institution. According to Harrison, they do not want to put a big "for sale" sign on the property, but they did invite UCONN, Hartford Public Schools, St. Francis, the developers of Goodwin Estate, and CREC to inspect the site and asked if they had any interest in it. It is unclear whether these prospects were asked if they could envision any use for portions of the site, or if they were only asked about the entire parcel. According to the consultants, the cost of adaptive reuse of the site for condos would be in excess of \$200 per square foot (excluding land acquisition costs), which is prohibitively expensive, especially given the current economic climate.
5. None were interested at that time, although CREC came back a few months later and expressed an interest.

6. Based on that conversation, UH entered a confidential agreement with CREC not to negotiate with any other parties until Oct. 1, 2009. The confidentiality of this arrangement was breached by CREC itself when it made its presentation to WECA, so that is no longer an issue. Also, the agreement is NOT an option to buy; it does not obligate either party to anything, it simply prevents UH from negotiating with any other interested parties until Oct. 1.
7. According to Walter Harrison, he is not interested in "giving it away." The implication being that the Board of Regents at UH would not agree to sell to a developer at a bargain rate in order to make a deal happen that better suits the neighborhood.
8. Harrison acknowledged that the University has not done a good job of maintaining the property, but he did not promise any changes in that regard. He reiterated that UH has many competing demands upon its resources.
9. Many within the UH community would like to use the space for their programs, but no one has stepped up and agreed to cover the costs of making the space functional. It does seem likely that UH will be moving a small construction studies program onto the site (5 to 7 employees). They have decided against putting any undergraduate programs or residents here since it is too removed from the main campus on Bloomfield Avenue. They tried this unsuccessfully in the past, but the lack of a fitness center and dining facilities made it an unpopular choice among the undergrads.
10. According to Harrison, he thinks it is highly unlikely CREC will be able to move forward with its plans in October given the budget constraints at the state level.
11. According to David Barrett, the zoning on the parcel would also make it difficult for CREC to erect the 3-story building and to accommodate 500 +/- high school students as proposed, even if they did manage to buy the property. Their proposal was light in details about how they would use the two main historical buildings on the site, but it seems they would use them for offices.

Among those who asked questions or made comments, the consensus seemed to be:

- ♦ UH needs to do a better job of communicating with the neighborhood
- ♦ A high school is not a desirable addition to the neighborhood given the large number of students, the difference between a collegiate population and a high school one, the scale of the new buildings, and the fact that it keeps the property off the tax rolls.
- ♦ UH has a moral obligation to consider the needs of the neighborhood, not just the financial needs of the university.

In summary, it doesn't appear anything will happen in the near future, but there is no guarantee that UH won't sell the parcel to the highest bidder without regard for its intended use. Harrison agreed to come back to answer questions in October after the agreement with CREC expires. Everyone is on notice that the neighborhood is unhappy with UH's stewardship of the site and that they will not allow undesirable uses go unchallenged. It was not, however, an emotional meeting. Although Harrison seemed irritated by some of the comments, he, and all present, were patient and cordial.

Victoria