

Choosing Healthy Debate v Mudslinging

The Village Bath property at The Gate in Strathmore Village is once again subject of much controversy. Last summer, a proposal to rezone the property to Parking was considered and then withdrawn by the applicant in light of unanimous opposition. The unanimous opposition had two significant factors, its mediocre but compliant buffer zone with adjacent homeowners, and the far greater concern that by changing the zoning to Parking, the prospective purchaser would in the future enable the square footage to be added the existing 1900 Northern Blvd commercial property and achieve a total square footage that would then permit the owner to build larger commercial building, and perhaps as Kimco did at the King Kullen site, construct a future building far closer to the surrounding residential community.

After the application's withdrawal, the prospective purchaser began discussions with the Strathmore Village Civic Association (SVCA) to address those concerns. SVCA and South Strathmore Civics engaged the adjacent homeowners in several meetings over winter and spring, some of which I personally attended. I saw and heard many resident share their desire for plan revisions and concessions to address their specific concerns. I can attest that support indeed grew for the revised plan that now contains two important caveats: The purchaser agreed to (1) a written restrictive covenant that would preclude any future building on the Village Bath site and that its gross square footage would be restricted from being added to the existing commercial property for the purpose of achieving a larger commercial building than what is presently as-of-right by the 1900 Northern Blvd commercial owner, and (2) a much improved 50ft buffer zone and plantings with adjacent homeowners was designed, far in excess of TNH requirements. A new application was submitted for consideration by the TNH with those caveats. The Council of Greater Manhasset Civic Association submitted a letter that recognized that there were neighbors at the time who opposed it. The letter was NOT opposing the plan, but rather urged the TNH to be certain that should the TNH consider approving the plan that the approval carried with it the aforementioned important caveats.

Subsequently, on the eve of the prior TNH Public Hearing was a last minute change of heart by several of the residents for supporting the proposal to be opposing the proposal. Yes, we now know more of the immediate neighbors oppose the plan. Indeed, everyone always has the right to change their mind. However, in this case some residents have also initiated a more personal campaign against the SVCA leaders themselves. Opponents now openly criticize a process as unfair. These volunteer civic leaders have done nothing but hard work for their community to develop a plan that improved the current condition of an unsightly vacant property and the existing vehicular and pedestrian traffic hazard at The Gate roadway. The opponents criticize everything and everybody involved. While the opposition has indeed significantly increased, the plan that is proposed remains the ONLY plan. Adjacent residents have had decades to actively solicit a solution, but have been unsuccessful. Some view it as relying on hopes and dreams that some real estate developer will want to buy the property and build new homes immediately adjacent and overlooking the existing commercial parking lot, which seems to ignore the exact reason the current homeowners seem so adamant to reject themselves. Proponents know that the plan is not perfect and does not solve every problem, but chose to work with a purchaser that has been willing to work with residents, with mutual benefits and concessions to create a plan that improves and protects for the future.

I have no crystal ball to determine the future holds as the community continues a quest for the Village Bath property. However, I do know that the plan in our hands has several positive elements for the long term - that are now being all but ignored. I'm not the gambling type and prefer to place more effort with a purchaser willing to work with its neighbors. View and debate of the Plan is always healthy. I simply implore that as the process continues, that the dialog remain healthy and civil without neighbors bashing neighbors.

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