

January 19, 2006

Guest Essay (or Letter to the Editor):

Everyone may think it's a foregone conclusion the City will approve MatherLifeways' proposed complex in light of all the favorable letters-to-the-editor and along with the Plan Commission's recommendation for approval. But has anyone thought this development might be detrimental to the entire City, especially to every residential neighborhood adjacent to commercial and business zoning? This project, with its 17 variances and oversize scale, could set a precedent that would allow for similar Planned Developments (either institutional or commercial) to be built adjacent to residential neighborhoods throughout the City.

Let's examine Evanston's recent history regarding development's impact on residential neighborhoods.

Starting in 1997, several neighborhood groups throughout the city became concerned that our zoning ordinance contained incongruent zoning districts that allowed massive height to abut single family neighborhoods. Evanston residents, merchant property owners, City staff, and the Evanston Plan Commission studied the problem for years.

The question became: How much and what kind of development can occur that will enhance but not negatively impact the neighborhoods and the city? All aspects were examined: land use, urban design, zoning, transit, parking, traffic, and fiscal impacts. Baseline data included photographic inventory, lists of businesses and land uses, zoning height analyses, survey of traffic, parking, and car ownership. Care was taken to analyze each facet in context with the others.

The most well-known of these efforts is the Chicago Avenue Initiative, but other neighborhoods scattered throughout Evanston also wrestled with the problem of incongruent zoning. As a result, over the following years, several commercial and business districts were rezoned with the intent of minimizing the undesirable consequences of too-tall oversize buildings on adjacent family homes.

Sections of Chicago Avenue were rezoned from 10 stories (allowed) to 6 stories and from 12 stories to 4 stories. Sections of Main Street around Chicago Avenue were rezoned from 12 stories to 4 stories; a section at Asbury and Howard was rezoned from 12 stories to 4 stories; and, just recently, a section of the Central Street business district was rezoned to protect the single-family neighborhood across the alley.

None of these areas had a transitional zoning district to protect residential neighborhoods from commercial use and that is why rezoning the height and density extremes was necessary. However, the City Core is surrounded by transitional zones for the purpose of protecting surrounding residential neighborhoods from downtown development.

MatherLifeways lies to the east and OUTSIDE this transitional zone; therefore it should have height and density equal to or LOWER than the transitional zone to soften its effect on the single family residential historic district to the east. The by-right-zoning of R6 (8 stories) is reasonable and provides protection for the surrounding neighbors. To allow MatherLifeways to build 10 stories is a step in the wrong direction.

Our Zoning Ordinance and our Comprehensive General Plan imply intent to protect historic neighborhoods, provide assurance against negative impact, and preserve neighborhood integrity. Yet, when new development is proposed under a Planned Development, these objectives become negotiable.

It is naïve to believe that one development project does not affect another. The effects of precedent setting are now apparent throughout Evanston's ever expanding downtown market-driven redevelopment, as developers ask for increasingly more variances and continue pushing closer to the edge of the City Core, encroaching on residential neighborhoods. Transitional areas, created to soften the impact of the City Core on surrounding neighborhoods, are slowly being absorbed into the City Core's height and density because the City constantly grants variances to Planned Developments.

If we say yes to the MatherLifeways' variances, what stops another developer in the future from expecting the same variances in the rest of the City? Evanston neighbors, beware!

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Visit www.matherneighbors.org