

# Neighbors seek Mather plan data

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Residents are pressing aldermen to move Mather LifeWays Inc. officials to provide financial information to back up the group's claim that it needs a project of this scope to remain financially viable.

Mather LifeWays, a not-for-profit organization, is proposing to build two state-of-the-art, continuing care retirement communities, eventually replacing the Mather Gardens, 1615 Hinman Ave., and Georgian, 422 Davis St. Mather is seeking City Council approval to build structures that exceed zoning limits in the number of units, height, lot coverage and other areas.

The city's Plan Commission earlier recommended unanimously in favor of the proposal, which will replace 220 units with 245 independent living units and about 40 long-term-care units.

Speaking Monday at the opening hearing of the City Council's Planning and Development Committee on the issue, David Reynolds, representing neighbors, told aldermen Mather has failed to produce data to back up its claim it needs the zoning changes to remain financially viable on the project.

"The average buy-in cost will be \$500,000 and the lowest buy-in cost will be \$270,000, but we do not know how many of either of these units will exist or what size they will be," said Reynolds, who lives in the area and owns the Homestead, a residential hotel next to the Mather Gardens.

"We do not know how many will cost more or what the upper costs will be. We do know that at a mean buy-in cost of \$500,000, most Evanstonians will not be served by this facility."

Reynolds said that unlike Three Crowns Park, another retirement com-

munity that submitted a financial feasibility analysis to the city to support its building program, "Mather has not provided a financial analysis to prove that large-scale buildings are essential. They instead are providing the council incomplete data with which to make a decision."

## Benefits touted

David Reifman, an attorney presenting Mather LifeWays' case, spoke of the financial and other benefits that the \$150 million-plus project will bring to the city.

He told aldermen the buildings will generate between \$650,000 and \$1.1 million in property taxes, compared to the \$70,000 generated by the existing buildings.

Moreover, 65 percent of the tax revenue will go to the public schools, on a project that involves no school children,

he said.

Reifman said the number of units sought is the minimum number to make the project financially feasible.

He quoted earlier testimony indicating that were Mather to conform to current zoning, it would have to increase its entrance fees per unit by about 30 percent and monthly fees by 41 percent.

"The market would not be willing to pay these higher prices and, therefore, the project would not be financeable, buildable or affordable," Reifman said. "Although Mather is not for profit, it is not immune from market forces."

Unlike another high-end condominium project, the Mather proposal addresses the city's Comprehensive Plan's description of housing units for the city's older adults, he said, as well as those with special needs as an important component.

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Reifman maintained in his presentation that the proposed project will have less impact on the surrounding area and single-family neighborhood than one built in accordance with existing zoning limits.

Reifman said design features, use of quality building materials, open space to the east and other features will diminish the effect of increased height (111 feet compared to 85 allowed by zoning), density and increased lot coverage.

He said the proposed height is only 2 feet higher than the current Georgian, and in context with a concentration of taller buildings at Hinman and Davis.

Unlike the eight-story Waterford and nine-story Homestead, which are immediately adjacent to single-family lots, the proposed buildings are generally set back "more than a football field away" from the single-family homes to the east, Reifman testified.

### 'Canyon' concerns

Reynolds, though, pointed to the "canyon effect" created by the height of the proposed buildings massing on the street.

"With twin sheer walls on each side of Davis Street, it will create the sense of standing in a well with walls rising to 107 feet straight up on both sides," he said, "only a few feet from the sidewalk."

He said the requests to exceed zoning also stand out because the two city blocks where the buildings are located are

the only place in Evanston where the highest (R-6) and lowest (R-1) residential districts co-exist.

Mather requested exceptions that, if granted, will have the effect, he said, of placing "two buildings worthy of a high-density, downtown location on what are arguably two of Evanston's most attractive apartment blocks."

Jill Wortman, another speaker and resident on the 400 block of Grove Street, noted the recent rezoning of allowable building heights along Central Street, reducing the height from 45 to 40 feet; and similar efforts to protect residential neighborhoods along Chicago from overdevelopment.

She told aldermen residents believe that Mather started "high" in its zoning request, asking for the largest project possible in case the city required them to scale it back.

"We are looking to you, as our elected officials," she told aldermen at the beginning of her presentation, "to balance the interests of the developer, the neighborhood and the city at large."

After the hearing, during the call of the wards session of the regular City Council meeting, 4th Ward Alderman Steven J. Bernstein asked City Manager Julia A. Carroll to discuss the situation with Mather officials and work out a way to obtain more financial details on the project.

Committee members are expected to resume the Mather hearing on Jan. 23.