

Mather LifeWays: Naughty or nice?

Evanston/ The executives at Mather LifeWays have an unusual wish list this holiday season, involving numerous requests for zoning variances.

The buildings that Mather plans to replace, which are in a residential neighborhood and across an alley from single-family homes, already exceed what the zoning now prescribes. But, Mather wants to dramatically increase the mass of the buildings, by building to 10 stories and out towards lot lines; renderings are at the Web site

www.matherneighbors.org.

Mather positions the proposed growth as necessary for the new facility to be financially viable. But, it is not clear why Mather would need any increase at all in size from the existing 220 total units (they want 309 units). Mather has chosen not to provide financial analysis to support their claim that they need to expand. Nor have they provided any reason for not providing such evidence.

The situation is all the more curious given that a lot of continuing-care retirement communities, which is what Mather plans to build, are smaller than what Mather desires. Even if super-sizing provides a competitive advantage in the industry, Mather has other advantages, including income tax exemption, wealth and location.

Also fueling my curiosity — academic researchers have found that executives at nonprofit continuing-care retirement communities have incentives for profit maximization and growth.

So, are the Mather executives being naughty or nice when they position their wish list as necessary?

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Perhaps it does not matter because, in either case, there must be limits to how far the zoning ordinance can be stretched. If such limits no longer exist, I want to add them to my wish list this year.

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