

Wicker Park Committee

General Membership Meeting Wicker Park Lutheran Church February 2, 2005

A much larger group than usual with many new faces gathered to hear and be heard on the matter of the former noodle factory site at Ellen and Wood. Alvin Joyner, president, presided. He was joined at the dais by Alice Prus, director, and guest Manny Flores, First Ward alderman. Alvin began by reading a poem entitled "The Salvation of the Dawn," before asking for reports from the subcommittees and board.

Treasurer: Craig Norris reported that a new banking account was opened at National City and that everything else is fine. As there were no other pressing reports, Alvin introduced Alderman Flores and handed the floor over to Preservation and Development.

Wood/Ellen project: Aracely Nevarez Joyce outlined the history of the project. In the early fall the developer, Equinox, in seeking variances, met with the subcommittee, who reviewed the design and subsequently requested revisions. When the developer returned with a revised plan, the subcommittee reviewed and voted on their recommendation to the general membership. The results were: 8 for Equinox' revised proposal and 2 against. 2 subcommittee members did not vote.

Equinox Development: representatives present were Sean McGrath of Equinox, his zoning attorney, Hilary Sylvia of the law offices of Samuel V.P. Banks, and the project's architect, Bill Kokalias of Axios Development.

First up was Mr. Kokalias, who presented the original plans and compared them to the revised version.

Ms. Sylvia took the floor to outline the zoning issues. The property is zoned B33, which requires commercial on the first floor. Equinox is seeking a variance to allow residential units on the first floor. As the new zoning ordinance only came into effect 11/04 and has not yet been thoroughly tested, it's not yet clear whether or not they will also be requesting a front yard variance.

Sean McGrath simplified the matter: "we're trying to avoid building commercial on the first floor; in return we've provided a much lower volume of units." Mr. McGrath said that as of right he could build lot line to lot line, 54 units, with commercial on the first floor, and no green space at all. But this was something he never wanted to do. In contrast, he's proposing 28 units.

At this point many questions and comments erupted from the audience (responses in parentheses), for instance:

**What will the units sell for? (low 300,000's to low 500,000's)*

**What are your plans for the lot west of the alley? (no plan yet, might sell.)*

**There's already not enough parking and too much traffic in the neighborhood! (developer pointed out that the parking they're providing is more than ample --*

nearly 2-1 ratio -- and conveniently located, so that the residents won't be tempted to park on the street.)

**why are you building four units per building? Why not three, like most buildings in the neighborhood?*

**If he cut more he'd have to walk away – another developer could come in and build as of right!*

As the grumbling was building to an uproar, Alderman Flores took control of the floor. He praised the exhaustive, deliberative, and exacting efforts of the subcommittee. He and his office have also reviewed the project exhaustively, and he felt they had leveraged all the influence they could. He said he considered the proposal now to be the best project possible under the current zoning, and it was time to balance the interests of all parties. Then he asked Aracely to add more light to the matter.

Aracely, once more, outlined the history of the project. The subcommittee got a number of changes from the developer, including a top floor setback, reduction in units, increase in parking, and various other accommodations. Finally, she reminded everyone that the subcommittee is only an advisory body and not in a position to approve anything.

Joe Lake moved for a vote to support the proposal. The motion was seconded. As written ballots were distributed, the questions and arguments continued:

**I consider the argument that “we could do worse” an insult*

**What about zoned parking for the neighborhood?* (Alderman Flores said that he'd had requests and had a process for reviewing them. Char Sandstrom asked that the Alderman share these requests with the WPC's Transportation and Parking subcommittee.)

**What's the time-line for construction (break ground May 1)*

**Were there shady dealings behind the unusual zoning designation of the property, and was former Alderman Granato involved in them?* (Alderman Flores didn't think it was proper to comment on something that happened during his predecessor's tenure, or to speculate about shady dealings when Alderman Granato wasn't there to defend himself.)

**Aldermen have too much power on zoning issues; citizens should vote on zoning*

**Is down-zoning an option here?*

At this point, the results of the vote had been tabulated and were announced:

The total count was 30 for, 14 against the revised Equinox proposal.

Among members, it was 16 for, 6 against.

Among non-members, 14 for, 8 against.

There was a bit of grumbling and then, without further ado, virtually all of the new faces got up and left, as Alvin called after them that the meeting had not been adjourned and pleading that they respect the organization. Eventually, the remaining few gave him their attention, and when the room grew silent, Alvin adjourned the meeting.

Respectfully submitted, Laura Hunt, secretary.