

Wicker Park Committee

General Membership Meeting Wicker Park Lutheran Church, June 1, 2005

As members leisurely mingled and munched on pizza, an unfamiliar but commanding voice didn't so much *call* us to order as it *ordered* us to order. It was the voice of our guest of honor, Paul Beitler, President and CEO of the Beitler Company, one of the most prominent real estate firms in Chicago. Alvin Joyner, WPC President, was on vacation. In his absence, Susan Hill, Vice President, hurried to the front of the room to take the reins of the meeting.

New Development: Mr. Beitler was there, voluntarily and as a courtesy, to present to the committee the major project his company is currently developing for sites on both sides of North Avenue, just west of the Kennedy Expressway underpass. As he spoke, images of the sites and proposed designs were projected overhead and a booklet containing more detailed illustrations and information was passed around. The Beitler Company is also preparing a website that we will soon be able to consult for progress reports. The major points of Mr. Beitler's presentation:

It's a development conceived as a "gateway" to the west side of the expressway and to Wicker Park, encompassing both residential and commercial entities, comprised of three separate "pieces," each with ample underground parking, constructed of white aluminum and glass in a style inspired by the French '30s architecture of Le Corbusier. They are tough sites from a developmental standpoint, and it has been "a challenge to find people who had a reason to be there."

The first "piece" will be primarily a Mercedes Benz showroom with, secondarily, a Starbucks, a US Cellular outlet, and one more operator yet to be determined, such as, for example, a Panera Bread shop. It will provide 110 underground parking places. The showroom will not have a service department. The second piece will be a LaSalle National Bank call center and banking facility, with 96 parking spaces. The third piece will be a seven-story, 23-unit condo building. Each 1800 sq ft unit will be appointed luxuriously, with an asking price of approximately \$410/sq ft, or \$700,000 - \$800,000. Many of the condos are already spoken for.

All the buildings will feature "green roofs," as required, and attractive landscaping at ground level. The project has not yet received Planning Commission approval; that will be determined "later this month."

Mr. Beitler asserted that the new buildings will serve as a buffer zone, blocking highway noise and pollution from the surrounding neighborhood, and as a much needed improvement to an area he considered downtrodden; somewhere – in particular under the expressway, where homeless people can be found camping out -- he "wouldn't want to walk around at night." Teddy Varndell took exception to this characterization, and the heated exchange he initiated with Mr. Beitler, who took exception to Teddy's exception,

occasioned the evening's only discordant note. Otherwise, Mr. Beitler displayed nothing but graciousness, which the members, in obvious appreciation, took pains to reciprocate.

Questions arose about how Mr. Beitler will keep the white aluminum buildings gleaming, and he said he would be doing a lot of power washing. Alice Prus asked if he could provide signage, so that people on the highway knew that they were entering Wicker Park, and he responded that he could not, but that perhaps IDOT, which controls the expressway, might be able to do something.

There was concern about traffic flow at an intersection that is already so bad that most people in the neighborhood go out of their way to avoid it. He responded that traffic in and out of the buildings would be guided/encouraged to access North Avenue indirectly, via side streets. As to worries about the disruption caused by such major construction, Mr. Beitler assured us that the three pieces would not be built all at once. The two commercial buildings would be built first, with the condo site used as a staging area. In response to another question, Mr. Beitler promised that lights in the commercial buildings will be turned off at night, so as not to disturb local residents. As a general contractor, he has signed on Turner. Claudia Skylar spoke in praise of the way Mr. Beitler maintains all of his buildings, saying that he is "top-notch" in this category, among others.

A motion to support the project was seconded, and a show of hands indicated that all were in favor.

Cultural Affairs: Mark updated us on the Antiques & Junque sale coming up on June 18: 25 people have signed up, and he hopes to have close to a hundred. Maps will be available for free at the WP field house.

Party in the Park: lacking adequate enthusiasm and volunteers, some members thought we ought to cancel this year. Mark said these views would be discussed at the next board meeting.

Other Business: Elaine Coorens announced a party she'll be having on July 16, a 100 yr birthday party for her house, with walking tours of the neighborhood, games and refreshments. Tickets, available on the day at the field house, will be \$20.

Laura Hunt announced the upcoming June Garden Social, hosted by the Garden Club. The next one after that will be on July 10, with a tour of the gardens in the park plus 4 private gardens, followed by a party with refreshments. She also announced that at the next general meeting, a representative of the Wicker Park Greens will discuss their grassroots recycling program.

With that, Susan adjourned the meeting.

Respectfully submitted, Laura Hunt, Secretary.