LETTER FROM THE PARISH COUNCIL TO PARISHIONERS ON THE PARK

Dear Parishioners,

At its March meeting, the Parish Council supported the recommendation of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Park to conduct a feasibility study on building a permanent structure to house the most vulnerable of those who are homeless while maintaining open park space. This letter explains how the Council arrived at that decision.

During data collection for the Strategic Plan in 2013, we received a lot of unsolicited parishioner concern about the park when parishioners were asked for input on weaknesses and threats to our community’s future. It is the Parish Council’s duty to identify and consider available options to address identified issues, including the community’s opinions on these options, before the course of action the parish should take is decided.

This process led to establishing an Ad Hoc Committee to explore options for the management of the park. This committee, appointed in September, was composed of people with experience in homelessness, housing and shelter options, and experience in the park itself. The entire parish owes them a debt for the time and talent they employed in this effort. Their committee worked, interviewing a number of outside experts, until January when they submitted their recommendations. Their first recommendation was to regain management control of the park and to recruit parishioners in making it a true ministry; this had broad support and was accepted by the Council in February. Michael Kelly is leading the effort.

The second recommendation to establish a new committee to ascertain if building in the park would be feasible as an option became more contentious and the parish was given more time to consider. The recommendations were posted on the website for two months with parishioner comments invited by bulletin and email tree. There was a February Town Hall Meeting and an Open-Mic Session in March. All emailed parishioner comments were collated and distributed to the council and to the parish community via the email tree.

We received written and verbal comments from approximately 13% of the registered parishioners with the 21 opposed outnumbering the 17 in favor. All opposition was anchored in the desire for the land to remain a park, thus making a feasibility study unnecessary. Many positions were based on the changes to be introduced by building (e.g. unstudied environmental impact, aesthetics of a building, or the loss of the full half-acre as parkland). Some misunderstood the Ad Hoc Committee’s mandate that focused their effort on identifying options for the management of park itself. This would have excluded the option of building elsewhere. In fact within the constraints we have, our options for park management are quite limited. Fr. Lawrence considers it nonnegotiable that people experiencing homelessness be allowed to sleep overnight in the park. We cannot afford either a park manager to provide an ongoing park presence or a contract with the Downtown Partnership of Baltimore for Monday through Friday cleaning if the parish intends to finally fund an effective middle school program as recommended in the Strategic Plan and indicated as a funding priority to the Pastor in December, 2014.

When we met as a Council on Tuesday evening, it was with these considerations before us. After guest parishioners who wanted to speak were afforded the opportunity to do so, members of the Parish Council went around the circle for opinions and positions. After deliberating, we had eight Council members in favor of the Ad Hoc Committee’s majority recommendation and six members opposed.

In consensus decision-making our options were these:

* first, we could postpone further discussion if we believed we might eventually reach agreement but no one offered that they believed prolonging the discernment would alter enough opinions and all thought the issue needed a resolution;
* second, any one of us could state willingness to live with the will of others to achieve resolution;
* third, any one of us could say that it is not a decision we personally would make but we will ‘step aside’ so resolution can occur; or
* finally, that those in majority could decide to refrain from action in deference to those in the minority.

At this time, one of the study proponents expressed willingness to ‘step aside’ and stated that the entire project would likely be adversely influenced by the pastor’s opposition making it a waste of time. Fr. Lawrence assured the group that he would honor the will of the Council and inform agencies that he had allowed the study. More discussion occurred. Members were asked if anyone had changed their positions; no one had. The last option to refrain from action in deference to the minority was posed as a way to resolution. At this point, viewing the recommendation in black-and-white terms was challenged since we as a Council had committed ourselves to finding a ‘third way’ and this impasse presented a ‘third-way’ opportunity to practice finding a way forward.

One sticking point was the wording of the recommendation which seemed to some to indicate

that the feasibility study was only the first step in the foregone conclusion to actually build. The language in the committee recommendation is a bit ambiguous but had been corrected in the FAQs that were posted on the website and distributed via email in January. The feasibility study will determine if building in the park is feasible based on Council-approved criteria; any decision to build must come before a future Council for further consideration.

Another major concern of those opposed was the environmental impact of a building in the park and the commitment and mission of our parish to reducing our carbon footprint through good stewardship. The proponents added that environmental impact can be added to the study committee’s mandate as one of the feasibility criteria.

Another poll was taken showing there were 8 in favor (with one willing to step aside) and 6 opposed (with three willing to step aside): 7 to 3 in favor. The Parish Council Constitution was reviewed that said consensus did not require unanimity but ‘near-unanimity’ which we agreed we achieved; and in fact if the proposal had been put to a vote of the voting members, it would be 5 for and 2 opposed, an outcome affirming the general discussion. No one believed that waiting another month would change the outcome. So we decided the study should go forward with specified feasibility criteria which incorporated council and community environmental concerns.

As these criteria and the charge to the committee are developed they will be made known to the parish in a transparent manner.

Those of us who participated in this process felt the power of a Trinitarian God leading us into the third way, a path forward that can give us the potential to discern what our future options may be in living out our professed mission to stand with the poor and disenfranchised of our neighborhood. And we did this with prayer and honesty and respect and affection. We pray that that spirit extends to the community we serve.

The Parish Council