

Proposed redevelopment of McDonogh 31 school into apartments draws ongoing debate

Posted by Alicia Serrano at 11:44 am business, city government

From the Mid City Messenger

<http://midcitymessenger.com/2015/09/04/proposed-redevelopment-of-mcdonogh-31-school-into-apartments-draws-ongoing-debate/#more-11545>

Sep 04 2015



A local developer plans to turn the old McDonogh 31 school into 34 apartments (photo by Alicia Serrano, MidCityMessenger.com)

The proposed development of 34 apartments in the former McDonogh 31 school site on North Rendon Street is still facing much debate by neighbors, based on a meeting this week before the Faubourg St. John Neighborhood Association.

CCNO Development LLC, the developer of the project, has proposed four single-family homes for the lot behind the school as a part of the project as well.

The Neighbors of McDonogh 31 group remain concerned that the project will add too much density to the neighborhood. Shana Sassoon, one of the leaders of the group, said that the majority of its members live within 2 or 3 blocks of the proposed project.

“We have been meeting regularly working to ensure that any development there is appropriate and positive for the neighborhood,” Sassoon said at the Faubourg St. John Neighborhood Association meeting on Tuesday.

These neighbors are not against the project, but want to compromise to find a density that is suitable for the area, Sassoon said.

“We want to be very clear that we are not against this development or any reasonable increase in density, but the density that CCNO has proposed currently of 34 units and four houses is too dense and it is not appropriate for our neighborhood,” Sassoon said.

Jenny Bagert, another leader of the organization, said that neighbors believe the development will negatively impact the quality of life of the neighborhood.

“We’re worried the increased density will cause traffic issues, parking issues, subsequent infrastructure issues and will have a great effect on our neighborhood,” Bagert said.

“Most of us don’t have driveways, a lot of people park down the street from their house, sometimes even in the next block,” Bagert said.

Neighbors have met with the developer twice so far to discuss their concerns, but no resolution has emerged, the group said.

“All throughout this time, CCNO never agreed to reduce their density at all,” Sassoon said.

The group believes reducing the project from 34 apartments and 4 houses to 30 living units (single family residences included) would be a reasonable compromise, Bagert said.

“We are asking for a reasonable reduction because we feel like what they’re doing is too much,” Bagert said.

Bagert said that the density of the development should be consistent with what is already in the area.

“We think that however the most relevant issue with determining density is that the development, any multi-family development, should be consistent with the current zoning district and development pattern,” Bagert said. “The rest of the block on the other half is 13 lots with a total of 27 units, that’s an average of about two units per lot.”

Pierre Walker, of CCNO Development, LLC, said that he had not heard of any suggestions of reductions from the organization.

“What we have heard tonight is the first time of their suggestion of 30 units,” Walker said.

Walker said that he suggested a 10 percent reduction of the project about two months ago, but neighbors were not satisfied.

“I think it was July 1st or July 2nd when we suggested a 10-percent reduction of the units and a 10-percent increase in the parking,” Walker said. “The seven or eight people that were there at the time told us no and had no suggestions.”

Walker said that developers have asked for deferrals of project plans by the City Planning Commission, even though the Commission’s recommendation was for approval of the plans.

“We have stopped all of our actions from that date, April to the present date, and we have continued to take no further action while we engage,” Walker said.

Walker said that the development must meet the satisfaction of neighbors, but also be a successful business endeavor.

“It must satisfy the immediate and overall needs of the community, which must first and foremost be the adaptive reuse and redevelopment of that site rather than leaving it empty and abandoned,” Walker said.

“Also, it must be regardless of desires and wishes a business enterprise that is feasibly finance-able and that will survive,” Walker said.

Bagert replied that she had not heard of Walker's suggestion of a 10 percent reduction of the project. The only way to move forward is for neighbors and the developer to come to an agreement on the appropriate density, Bagert said.

"Starting today we are going to use every tool available to fight this, every possible tool," Bagert said.

"The only way this development is going to get done in a timely manner and without immense disruption is if we can agree to a reasonable reduction in density, otherwise this thing's going to get tied up for a long time," Bagert said.

After a heated discussion, Walker said that he would like to hold further conversations by email, to create a record of the concerns and suggestions.

Steve Mardon, president of the Faubourg St. John Neighborhood Association, said that the purpose of the conversation between the neighbors and the developer was simply a status update.

"My purpose tonight was not to have Pierre answer a million questions from everybody's concern," Mardon said. "My purpose was to have both sides give an update on what's going on so that the board knows what's going on."

Mardon concluded the debate by saying that the board will continue to communicate with both sides.

"Pierre, it seems like there is still a long ways off," Mardon said. "The lines of communication are open, so we will continue in that vein."