

"Federation Corner" column
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Suburban Hospital's destructive expansion plans doomed to fail

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This column is an unedited version of an article submitted to the Sentinel.

On Mondays, every two weeks or so, the Development Review Division of MNCPPC brings together staff from all of its divisions and staff from other county regulatory agencies to meet with recent applicants to provide comments that are meant to assist the applicants in a successful presentation to the Planning Board. This meeting is known as the Development Review Committee, or DRC. On rare occasions, these staff find such significant problems with an applicant's plans that success may be extremely difficult or perhaps impossible to achieve. This past Monday, two such problematic projects were presented to DRC, Clarksburg Town Center (CTC) and Suburban Hospital. The comments of every staff member present were so uniformly critical of the CTC project that it may take a miracle to get it approved. I will be writing about this planning catastrophe later this year. The MNCPPC staff response to Suburban Hospital's plans were not much better, particularly the proposal to permanently close Lincoln Street to the residents of the adjacent Huntington Terrace neighborhood so that the hospital could connect two adjacent blocks that it owns.

In Montgomery County, hospitals, like private schools and day care centers, are allowed to be located in residentially-zoned areas through a process known as the special exception, which is adjudicated and administered by the Board of Appeals with assistance from the Office of Zoning and Administrative Hearings. The needs and concerns of the immediately adjacent neighborhood are given great weight in the special exception process. Suburban Hospital has refused to work with its neighbors. Instead, it has engaged in a crude, disingenuous and ineffective propagandistic public relations campaign since 2002 to try to expand the way it wants to, not the way it needs to. This hospital supported a surreptitious effort in 2003 to eliminate the longstanding special exception process for hospitals. It has also sought to create the illusion of support from a larger "community" that stretched far beyond Huntington Terrace. Here are some examples of this PR effort:

Winter 2004 - "President's Message: A proposed amendment would address the concerns of hospitals like Suburban, which has lived in a residential neighborhood for more than 60 years, while serving an entire county. The proposed zoning process adjustments would accelerate the now cumbersome regulatory process that results in delays of several years before hospitals are able to make essential modifications to their campuses."

Summer 2006: "To ensure we receive important feedback from our many stakeholders, we assembled a Community Panel for a Healthy Future. This key advisory board includes 25 people who represent the broad interests of our growing and diverse Montgomery County community: neighborhood associations, civic and community organizations, emergency responders, business leaders, hospital patients, staff, physicians and volunteers. Additionally, we have initiated discussions with [MNCPPC] and other county officials. Through the Community Panel, we have discussed our goals and exchanged ideas in an open and transparent process. We look forward to continuing to work closely with our Community Panel, our immediate neighbors, and state and county officials as we finalize plans for an enhanced Suburban Hospital."

Fall 2006: "The web site also contains a section where you can register your support of our enhancement and modernization plans. It is extremely important for all those served by Suburban Hospital to take a few moments and register as a supporter today. In just a few short weeks, close to 400 people have signed up as supporters, and more continue to do so each day. As we prepare to bring our plans before Maryland state

health officials and Montgomery County Park and Planning, it will be critical that we demonstrate the strong support that exists for Suburban from residents throughout the county."

Winter 2006: "Hospital Enhancement Plans Garner Widespread Community Support - This fall was a busy time for Suburban Hospital and our efforts to build strong and widespread community support for the enhancement and modernization of our hospital and campus."

Summer 2007: "President's Message - As we prepare to file our plans with state and county officials later this summer, I am buoyed by the tremendous outpouring of support we have received from community residents. More than 5,000 area residents have signed bright yellow cards of support for the hospital enhancement project."

Summer 2008: "The Momentum is Building: Campus Enhancement Plans Advance - Community leaders are voicing broad support as Suburban Hospital unveils plans for our first major clinical enhancement program in 30 years and the changes are good news for you! Leaders in our community understand how important our enhancement is, too. TAKE ACTION. Please let county officials know that you support the revitalization of Suburban Hospital by contacting them today."

This 2008 issue also includes a postcard addressed to the Montgomery County Council with the following message: "As a resident of Montgomery County, I am writing to urge you to support Suburban hospital's campus enhancement plans, including the abandonment of one block of Lincoln Street that will make the project possible..."

The following news account excerpts show this effort for the sham that it is: June 17, 2007 Gazette news account:

"For residents in the Huntington Terrace neighborhood just west of the hospital's Old Georgetown Road campus, the expansion could mean more noise, reduced light from shadows cast by taller buildings and the potential for more traffic. 'It's a community hospital. It's in a neighborhood. It wants to be a really big regional hospital in a community footprint,' said Lesley Hildebrand, who lives nearby. 'I think they're trying to shoehorn their way on top of us. Some people would say they're getting too big for their britches.'

"Suburban's next move is to petition Montgomery County this summer to close one block of Lincoln Street, which bisects the property. If that is approved, the hospital will begin to outline to county regulators details of its expansion, which neighbors say would nearly double the size of the facility. Eventually, the matter will be turned over to a hearing examiner and reviewed by the county Board of Appeals.

"Neighbors, who said their relations with the hospital under Gragnolati's predecessor were friendlier, have begun alerting local officials about their concerns and are digging in for a long fight. 'They are trying to destabilize the neighborhood,' said Huntington Terrace Citizens Association President Lorraine Driscoll. The association voted twice last month to oppose the hospital's plans. Driscoll said Suburban could accomplish its modernization without closing Lincoln Street or tearing down houses that separate the hospital from the neighborhood.

"Gragnolati pointed to a panel of area residents that the hospital used to vet possible expansion plans, and Borenstein-Levy said the hospital has received about 5,000 expressions of support. The panel suggested that the hospital put extra parking next to Old Georgetown Road rather than close to the neighbors. It appears that the hospital has dropped plans for below-ground parking, which many of the neighbors had endorsed.

"Bob Deans, a board member of the Huntington Terrace Citizens Association, said the panel was stacked against the neighborhood. The only representative from Huntington Terrace, the hospital's closest neighbors,

eventually quit because the panel seemed to be a 'very cynical public relations charade,' Deans said. Some residents also accused the hospital of trying to muzzle neighbors by offering \$25,000 bonus payments to homeowners willing to sell and keep mum in any fight over expansion. A hospital spokeswoman said it would not be a deal breaker if a homeowner declined to remain silent.

"Gragnotati has also tried to persuade the county to limit neighborhoods' clout by changing the way hospital construction projects are reviewed. He has proposed limiting the significance that regulators could attach to neighbors' viewpoints. That effort has been watched carefully by civic organizations as well as the county's three other hospitals that are in residential neighborhoods."

February 13, 2008 Washington Post news account "The hospital will tear down 24 homes that it owns in the surrounding neighborhood to make room for the new construction. The county must approve the hospital's request to close a block of Lincoln Street in the neighborhood, in order for the expansion to go forward. The road splits the two blocks of Old Georgetown Road that would encompass the hospital's new, larger campus. Many, but not all, of the hospital's Huntington Terrace neighbors have rallied against closing any part of Lincoln Street, saying it is the neighborhood's central artery. Hospital officials say the road closure is the only way to unify the new and old segments of the campus. 'This is the same plan that Suburban has been trying to steam roll the community with for more than three years now,' said Bob Deans, Huntington Terrace Neighborhood Association spokesman. The hospital 'has what it needs for undeveloped property to build on and shouldn't push for closing Lincoln Street,' Deans said."

When I look at the drawing of the hospital's proposed plan for expansion in its latest piece of self-serving PR known as "New Directions," I see buildings set back far from streets, large open areas for driveways, and a large aboveground parking structure. Suburban Hospital appears to want to build a sprawling, suburban-style campus in an urbanizing area near downtown Bethesda where land is very expensive. By putting most of the parking underground and by clustering buildings close to Old Georgetown Road, the hospital could easily reduce its footprint by 50%. There is no need to destroy the neighborhood by demolishing any of the houses that the hospital owns or by closing Lincoln Street.

Suburban should permanently rent or sell the 24 houses it owns for workforce housing for its nurses and its other hospital workers. All of us should be speaking out in support of Huntington Terrace, opposing the closing of Lincoln Street, and condemning Suburban for its refusal to work transparently and in good faith with its real neighbors. I expect that the Board of Appeals will reject Suburban's plans and direct the hospital to listen to its neighbors, who have never opposed the hospital's need to expand, just an expansion that threatened the survival of their community.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to waynemgoldstein@hotmail.com