

Controversy averted at St. Dominic School site

About 200 concerned Hamilton-area residents breathed a collective sigh of relief as developers abandoned a plan to convert the vacant St. Dominic School into a low-income apartment building – instead constructing a mostly senior housing project.

Residents of the Hamilton, Arcadia, Lauraville and Beverly Hills neighborhoods were prepared for a slugfest with developers, representatives of Baltimore City and the Archdiocese of Baltimore during an April 11 community meeting about the proposal.

However, they were disarmed when Baltimore City Council Vice President Robert Curran read a letter from the city's housing commissioner stating a proposal to transform the former Catholic school buildings into 25 senior apartments and five non-elderly disabled units met the criteria to secure public funding.

Officials of Orchard Development and Homes for America pledged to drop their controversial low-income housing plan and move forward with the \$6 million subsidized senior apartment complex, which they expect to be completed by October, 2009.

"We were worried about a low-income project at that site bringing in more crime to the neighborhood," said Emmanuel Gikas, 45, who lives across the street from St. Dominic, Hamilton. "We're at the tipping point now."

However, the longtime neighborhood resident said the senior apartment plan is a welcome alternative and several community activists expressed their approval.

One woman who had arrived ready to speak out against the low-income plan ended up asking how she could apply to become a resident in the proposed apartment building.

The St. Dominic School building has been vacant since 2005 and continues to be a financial drain on the parish, said David R. Owens, manager of capital projects and development for the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

The proposed senior apartments will permit the parish to rid itself of the fiscal burden and offer much needed housing for people 62 and older, said Denis Sullivan, a Hamilton resident and parishioner of St. Dominic's.

"We feel strengthened by this opportunity," Ms. Sullivan said. "We don't want it to slip through our fingers."

The original plan had been to convert the former St. Dominic School into an equal amount of one- and two-bedroom senior apartments, but the developers said they were under the impression they could not secure city tax credits to make it feasible.

However, since Baltimore Housing Commissioner Paul T. Graziano said such a project would meet the criteria, the developers promised to abandon their low-income project in favor of their original plan.

If all of the plans are approved, renovations should begin in October 2008 and be completed a year later, said Polly Duke, senior vice president for the Annapolis-based Homes for America.

Rent will be based on income and will range from \$410 to \$819 per month for the one-bedroom units and \$491 to \$983 for the two-bedroom units, Ms. Duke said.