

St. Wenceslaus honors groups entangled in dispute

The Save Middle East Action Committee and East Baltimore Development Initiative may have clashed over plans to revitalize a troubled East Baltimore neighborhood, but both organizations agree that Baltimore's St. Wenceslaus has been instrumental in helping them compromise.

St. Wenceslaus, which is focusing on commemorating signs of hope in the community, honored the two groups with a Mass and reception May 20.

St. Wenceslaus pastor Father Peter Lyons, T.O.R., recognized both groups had a vested interest in reshaping the neighborhood, but had very different ideas about what was best for everyone involved, said Jack Shannon, president of EBDI.

"Father Lyons has been an honest broker and a voice of conscience," said Mr. Shannon, a Corpus Christi, Baltimore, parishioner, "for me personally and for our groups."

During the past several years, about 400 families in the "Middle East" neighborhood have been relocated to make room for a biotech park development, with the most recent action being the demolition of 12-square blocks of housing, Father Lyons said.

"Hardworking members of this community have endured so much emotional turmoil over the uncertainty of the future of their homes, businesses and the neighborhood, and more is coming," he said.

The next phase of the biotech project will impact about 20-square blocks, including the area surrounding the church, Father Lyons said.

Though the working poor in the neighborhood have endured upheaval in the redevelopment efforts made by the EBDI, the pastor said something needed to be done to combat the decaying conditions and violent crime in the area.

“Even though we see good things coming from the urban development, there is a great deal of suspicion from the residents that they will be the losers,” Father Lyons said.

“We’re trying to make sure they benefit if they are relocated, to a place that is affordable, around retail shops, near jobs and near public transportation.”

The parish has provided work and meeting space for both the EBDI and the SMEAC and offered both groups the opportunity to engage the community.

“The parish was on the ground floor in getting our group off the ground,” said Nathan Sooy, executive director of SMEAC. “They have also helped to give us a good relationship with the Archdiocese of Baltimore and over the years we’ve received funding from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development.”

The SMEAC has worked to get homeowners better than market value for their property when they are being forced to relocate and is continuing its efforts to persuade developers to create affordable housing out of a third of the new homes built in the area.

“Right now, we’re hearing that homes in the \$250,000 to \$300,000 range are being called affordable housing,” said Mr. Sooy, a Catholic who attends many different parishes in the archdiocese. “Most of the people who live in this neighborhood don’t see that as affordable.”

Those are among the items the two groups will continue to negotiate and both men say the church has been instrumental in bringing them to the bargaining table.

“I wouldn’t refer to us as a mediator,” Father Lyons said. “We want to be active partners in the process of improving our community. I suppose in a sense it puts us in the middle of the many different players in the process.”