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Maguire Campus controversy continues

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Posted: 12/2/09

St. Joe's appeal to zoning regulation issues regarding Maguire Campus yielded no forward progress for the university at the last hearing on Nov. 30.

The meetings will reconvene after the holidays for two more sessions, the first of which is set to take place on Monday, Jan. 7, at 5 p.m.

While members from both parties claim to seek an agreeable end to the deadlocked debates, fear of the university's over-expansion prevents neighbors from accepting the proposal, whereas the prospect of being checked and controlled by the local community bars the administration from entering into an agreement.

According to Brian Gordon, Lower Merion Township commissioner of the 12th ward, the situation might have been easily settled had the university promised to end development with the establishment of the baseball field.

"I think that this could work if the university could agree to these three things," said Gordon. "One is to agree to never light their field. The second would be for the university to limit its use to near fields, not so much the hockey field, but the fields along Berwick to varsity and intramurals. And the third issue is sound. We asked the university to do a mock-up of their proposed sound system and the university did not agree."

Gordon said that Lannon and the administration replied that they "cannot tie the hands of our successors" by entering into a binding contract with the Merion community.

As for Gordon's third request, Joan Chrestay, vice president for external affairs, did say that the university was perfectly willing to acquiesce.

Lauren Wylonis, co-director of the MCC, said that the entreaties of the Merion Community Coalition (MCC) have since been turned down, but maintained that if St. Joe's would cooperate, the MCC was perfectly willing to go along with the sound check.

Chrestay also pointed to inconsistencies in MCC demands, and cited various alternative proposals presented by the coalition, one of which proposed the demolishing of the Cynwyd Chapel for a new field site.

"On their side, quite frankly, what they have asked for has changed, it's a work in progress all the time," she said. "We have one leadership here, we speak with one voice, we have been very consistent in our message as we see it."

Earlier this fall, in an attempt to reconnect with campus neighbors, Chrestay produced and circulated a newsletter outlining the University's intentions for Maguire Campus development. According to Chrestay, the newsletter was produced after the MCC "enlisted the services of a lawyer," thus ending meetings between the coalition and Saint Joseph's administration.

"It was sent to hundreds of people in the Lower Merion Township," Chrestay said. "Our feeling is that up until this point, there has been a lot of misinformation going out about our planned use of the field."

However, Lower Merion neighbors didn't interpret the newsletter in the way Chrestay or the administration expected.

Wylonis refuted the validity of each of the assertions made in the newsletter. First, she said she disagreed with the claim that St. Joe's intended to significantly reduce the intensity of indoor and outdoor sports on Maguire Campus from levels reached by Episcopal Academy.

"This is in fact not the case," she said. "They like to not include intramural or club sports; if you include all of those, they will be playing significantly more."

Chrestay said that, in the matter of athletics, the difference in explanation stemmed from separate definitions of "collegiate sports."

"We never said we weren't playing intramural sports on the campus," said Chrestay. "But in our mind, of course, we made it very clear, 'Collegiate athletics'-anyone who knows the very basics about collegiate athletics understands that's varsity, club, and intramural."

Other debates follow similar patterns. Failure on both sides to clearly present the requirements of an agreeable contract have led to legal intervention, and presently the only contact between the two parties is through their attorneys.

While Chrestay maintains that field lights were never part of the original renovation plans, members of the MCC remain skeptical about the university's intentions to continue development. David Biloon, a local resident and MCC member, said that he recognized the university's potential to continually expand.

"It minimizes what they want to do here," he said of the newsletter. "They say they want to do one thing, but there is a potential to do more and it would be very good for us if they can really make a commitment one way or another. What they won't do is talk about lights, and what the future might be towards that."

Chrestay was not confident that St. Joe's would have the field ready for use by fall 2010, but maintained that acquiring the facility was a top priority of the university.

"We're committed to doing everything we can do no matter how long it takes for these teams to play on those fields, that's why we bought Maguire campus, to use the facilities," she said.

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