

Residents turn out to hear about Rex Ave. condo plans

Posted on May 9, 2018 (<http://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/2018/05/09/residents-turn-out-for-rex-ave-condo-plans/>), updated on May 9, 2018 (<http://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/2018/05/09/residents-turn-out-for-rex-ave-condo-plans/>) by Brendan Sample (<http://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/author/brendan/>)



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The historic home on Rex Avenue that will anchor a proposed new condo building. (Photo by Brendan Sample)

by Brendan Sample

With over a month having passed since Constellar Corporation proposed building a four-story condominium next to the historic house at 208-210 Rex Ave., neighbors have continually expressed their opposition to the plan. That opposition came to a head on Thursday, May 3, at the latest meeting of the Chestnut Hill Community Association's Land Use Planning and Zoning Committee, where more information was given about the project and local residents had the chance to provide their own input.

The meeting came after 65 residents showed up at the offices of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy to discuss the plans on March 27, but many left after part of a floor collapsed during the meeting. The neighbors were promised a safer, more secure meeting space at some point in the future, which came in the form of the main conference room of the Chestnut Hill Hospital. Last week's meeting drew similar numbers to the one at the conservancy, as 68 local residents came out to have their voices be heard.

LUPZ chair John Landis indicated at the beginning that the meeting would be purely informational, with no official decisions being made, but that did not stop neighbors from passionately advancing their arguments against the plans. Concerns were expressed over a perceived increase in traffic on Rex Avenue, a decrease in surrounding property values, a lack of parking space for the cars of people who would buy the condos, confusion as to what exactly the existing property is zoned for and a potential precedence that this could set for future developers.

One option that had been previously brought up as a way to combat a lack of parking space was the idea of an underground parking lot. While many neighbors were still in favor of this option, it is not something that is currently in the condo plans, though they are still in a formative stage.

Both Constellar and the homeowner are being represented by Carl Primavera, who was on hand and took the lead in providing much of the information and answering neighbors' questions. He confirmed that no official purchase has been made as of yet, and also spoke to the lack of interest that the house has generated over the past five years as well as the heightened interest of many Chestnut Hill residents in moving into condo-like buildings like the one being proposed.

Although none of those residents expressed any support for the current plans, they also offered different suggestions as to what to do with the property. Some agreed with the conservancy's preservation efforts, saying that they want to preserve the historic look of the neighborhood and thus keep the house standing. On the other hand, there were others who were not concerned about whether the house was to remain or get torn down.

Demolition is not an option for the house since the conservancy nominated it to be placed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places last year. The process is still ongoing, and Constellar would only be able to get a demolition permit if the house is denied a place on the Register or if the conservancy withdraws its application.

Though there were plenty of arguments and strong feelings to go around during the meeting, this long process is still only in its inception. Constellar will continue to look for community input to help shape its plans before coming up with something final, which is unlikely to happen at any point in the near future. Primavera also spoke about how any other plan that Constellar, or another developer, comes up with will have to go through this process of community review, meaning that the more revisions the plan undergoes, the longer it will take to implement.

The next LUPZ meeting is set for 8 p.m. Thursday, June 7, at the Chestnut Hill Hospital.

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