



Jeffrey Z. Slavin
Mayor

TOWN OF SOMERSET

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Rich Charnovich
Town Manager/Clerk-Treasurer

January 6, 2017

Mr. Casey Anderson
Chairman, Montgomery County Planning Board
8787 Georgia Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20895
Mcp-chair@mncppc.mc.org

Subject: Request to delay the February 2, 2017 Planning Board Hearing on Equity One's Sketch Plan for development in the Westbard Sector until completion of the River Road African Cemetery delineation

Casey
Dear Chair Anderson,

On January 2, 2017, the Somerset Town Council discussed the request by the Macedonia Baptist Church to delay the Planning Board Hearing until after a delineation of the River Road African Cemetery delineation has been completed. The Council agreed that we are in full support of their request (see attached letter). We believe it is important to take the time to make this determination.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey Z. Slavin
Mayor, Town of Somerset

Cc: Commissioner Sally Roman, Chair
Housing Opportunities Commission of Montgomery County
10400 Detrick Avenue
Kensington, MD 20895

"Where People and Trees Have Deep Roots and Grow Strong"

Sally.roman@hocmc.org

Marsha Coleman-Adebayo

President, MBC Social Justice Committee

Marsha Coleman-Adebayo <nofearcoalition@aol.com>



MACEDONIA BAPTIST CHURCH

5119 River Rd. • Bethesda, MD 20816



Reverend Sterling King Jr., Pastor • Reverend Segun Adebayo Assistant Pastor

January 4, 2017

Commissioner Sally Roman, Chair
Housing Opportunities Commission of Montgomery County
10400 Detrick Avenue
Kensington, MD 20895
Sally.roman@hocmc.org

Mr. Casey Anderson
Chairman, Montgomery County Planning Board
8787 Georgia Ave
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910
Mcp-chair@mncppc-mc.org

Subject: Request to delay the February 2, 2017 Planning Board Hearing on Equity One's Sketch Plan for development in the Westbard Sector until completion of the River Road African Cemetery delineation process

Dear Commissioner Roman and Chairman Anderson:

We write today on behalf of the Macedonia Baptist Church ("MBC") community. Our church, located at 5119 River Road, Bethesda, Maryland, 20816, was established in 1920 as part of a thriving community of descendants of enslaved Africans along River Road in the mid-1860s. The current membership of MBC is composed, in part, of descendants of the original African community on River Road.

Within the proposed Westbard Sector sits the Moses Tabernacle Cemetery in which members of the original River Road community and residents of a related community in Tenleytown were buried in the early twentieth century. Today that cemetery lies on land owned by two developers (Equity One and the Westbard Self Storage) who have development plans pending before the Planning Board (the "Board"), and the Housing Opportunities Commission ("HOC".) Note HOC leases some of the property owned by Equity One. The Board is scheduled to hold a hearing on the Equity One Sketch Plan on February 2, 2017.

The Moses Tabernacle Cemetery's historic legacy is currently under threat. The Cemetery was operative from 1911 until it was sold in 1958. Nonetheless, there is overwhelming evidence that there currently exist human remains on the proposed Equity One Parcel and possibly the parcel owned by Westbard Self Storage. We have been provided no evidence indicating that any human remains that once existed at the site have been removed and reinterred elsewhere.

Marcel Uter, Chairman, Deacon Board
Betty Harper, Church Clerk
Minister Aaron C. King, Chairman of the Trustee Board
Church: 301-656-0994 • Pastor: 301-649-6626

We view the land on which the Cemetery sits not only as a tangible example of our community's historic roots; we view this land as sacred ground. We urge HOC and the Planning Board to treat it with reverence, and our community with respect. Accordingly, we ask that no decisions be made on any planned construction on the subject parcels until we have had the opportunity to collect more information. The MBC respectfully requests that the Board delay the February 2 hearing (and any other hearings pertaining to cemetery property) until a cemetery delineation can be completed. We also respectfully ask that HOC support our request.

Background to this Issue:

The history of the African River Road community is rich and extensive. A small community of Africans established Macedonia Baptist Church 55 years after the Emancipation Proclamation. The community encompassed entrepreneurs, teachers, skilled labor, farmers, hard-working parents and a rich religious community. This community, without help from the government, purchased land, built businesses, a school, churches, and cemeteries to bury and honor their dead in the River Road area. According to historic records, the River Road African community was decimated by developers and political strategies that effectively transferred wealth based on land ownership from African families to white businesses. This transfer of wealth through a variety of unethical and racist strategies undermined and dispossessed our community leaving hundreds of families landless and unable to transfer wealth based on land ownership to future generations.

According to oral history, after dispossessing the land-owning African community, the cemetery containing the ancestors of the former residents of River Road was desecrated – tombstones were removed and graves excavated. One account of the desecration of this sacred site is cited by Robert Dyer:

"At least one eyewitness has recalled construction workers building the Westwood Tower apartments at 5401 Westbard Avenue stopping work 12 times, after encountering 12 graves during excavation for the building. After the 12th stoppage, someone at the construction site ordered workers to no longer stop, and to illegally relocate any further human remains found to an unknown location downward from the rear of the property. The specific location, as well as the fate of the first 12 sets of remains, is unknown at this time."

Questions abound: Where are these twelve skeletal remains? Were other remains excavated, and if so, where are they? How many remain still exist at the proposed site? There are simply too many unresolved issues to allow a vote to move forward.

As descendants of the original River Road community, we demand to be treated as equal partners in the development process. Equity One has worked on this project and the redevelopment scheme for almost *three years*, but only agreed to conduct a cemetery delineation within the last few months; yet, the MBC community was only recently involved in overseeing that process. Clearly, we have not had adequate time to present our concerns and proposals regarding how our ancestral lands should be respected and honored. The African Cemetery is not simply an MBC matter relevant only to the descendant community,

rather, it is a matter of historical significance and importance for all citizens of Montgomery County.

Phyllis Edelman, President of the Springfield Civic Association in a letter to HOC regarding the proposed building of a parking garage in the area of the cemetery wrote:

"In addition to the issue of developing a parking garage on land that should be greenspace, there is an added concern on the part of the Springfield community: this proposed garage would be built on land that was once a cemetery for the ancestors of members of the Macedonia Baptist Church on River Road. Desecrating this cemetery when Westwood Tower was built – long before HOC owned this building – was a terrible act of cultural and religious indifference. Not acknowledging that this was once sacred ground and may still hold human remains, compounds the inhumanity of that original desecration. Such an action would be an embarrassment to those of us living in the Springfield community and to all who live in Montgomery County."

We agree with the Springfield Civil Association. We urge the Montgomery Planning Department to reschedule the February 2, 2017 hearing to a later date so that the anthropologists and archeologists who have been identified by the descendant community will have adequate time to work on the cemetery delineation process. In addition, the MBC community will also have adequate time to participate in the process.

Sincerely,



Rev Segun Adebayo, Ph.D.
Interim Pastor

Dr. Marsha Coleman-Adebayo
President, MBC Social Justice Committee

Mr. Harvey Matthews
MBC Trustee and member of descendant community

The organizations and individuals listed below support the request for an extension:

Ms. Phyllis R. Edelman
President, Springfield Civic Assn.

Ms. Sarah Morse
Executive Director
Little Falls Watershed Alliance

Rev. Nancy Ladd

**River Road Unitarian Universalist Congregation (RRUUC)
Bethesda, MD**

**Ms. Linda Plummer
President
Montgomery County NAACP
Ms. L.Paige Whitley
Historian**

**Ms. Sara Robinson
Secretary
Little Falls Watershed Alliance**

**Mr. Bob Cooke
Gaithersburg, MD**

**Ms. Marnie Shaul
Council Vice-President
Town of Somerset**

**Ms. Rita Parks
Chair, Racial Justice Task Force
River Road Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, MD**

**Ms. Jan Sinnott
River Road Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, MD**

**Ms. Marcia Kingman
River Road Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, MD**

**Ms. Vonna Heaton
River Road Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, MD**

**Mr. Ed Heaton
River Road Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, MD**

**Mr. John Collinge
River Road Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, MD**

**Ms. Nancy Henningsen
River Road Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, MD**

Ms. Patti Francis

**River Road Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, MD**

**Ms. Charlotte Jones-Carrol
River Road Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, MD**

**Mr. Jon Kerner
River Road Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, MD**

**Ms. Linda Bleadingheiser
River Road Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, MD**

**Rev. Louise Green
River Road Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, MD**

**Ms. Marjorie Newman
River Road Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, MD**

**Ms. Maria Olsen
River Road Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, MD**

**Ms. Holly Dempsey
River Road Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, MD**

**Ms. Candy Kessel
River Road Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, MD**

**Ms. Margaret Paris
River Road Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, MD**

**Mr. Chris Hager
River Road Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda MD**

cc:

**The Honorable Ike Leggett
County Executive
ocemail@montgomerycounty.gov**

The Honorable Roger Berliner
President, County Council
Councilmember.Berliner@montgomerycountymd.gov

Ms. Patty Vitale
Chief of Staff, Councilmember George Leventhal
Montgomery County Council
Patricia.Vitale@montgomerycountymd.gov

Montgomery County Planning Department:

Ms. Gwen Wright- gwen.wright@montgomeryplanning.org
Mr. Robert Kronenberg,
Mr. John Marcolin,
Mr. Mike Riley,
Ms. Susanne Paul