

July 2, 2020

Dear Commissioners,

Thank you for considering the request of Westover Hills United Methodist Church for additional uses of our facilities at 1705 and 1707 Westover Hills Blvd. While we have received numerous positive comments from neighbors about our plans for the future, we are also aware of the two written objections to our request, which I would like to address.

Concerning the objection that the leaders of the church could one day sell the property to an undesirable commercial entity, we agree that this would be completely undesirable and in fact, the farthest thing from our minds. The church has been a community asset for over seventy years has no thoughts of leaving. We have consistently offered many benefits to the community. We have given an entire parcel for a tot lot that is open to the community. We provide space for community meetings, a vibrant mom's group and many programs for the families of the community, including a preschool that is considered one of the best in the city. Recently, a community member offered a free exercise class in our building, and we offered the space for free as well. We have no intention of leaving the community, but are instead living into the full definition of what it means to be a church. Churches are about more than worship and Sunday School, activities that are most often reflected in governmental codes and regulations. Churches at their best are deeply involved in ministries of justice and compassion. Our partnership with The Next Move will provide job and life skill training to adults with developmental disabilities. This population has a 70% unemployment rate in our Commonwealth. The Next Move has a track record of students finding and maintaining employment. They specifically want a location for their baking internship program that is in the midst of a community, so that the students will become known as members of the community, eliminating the isolation that often comes to those who are neuro-diverse. In a city that seeks greater diversity, we are taking concrete steps to make that happen, building on our history of working with youth and young adults with developmental disabilities. It would seem a pity to deprive this vulnerable population of a life-giving opportunity out of fear for the remote possibility of an event in the distant future.

As for increased traffic and concerns about our parking lot, Westover Hills UMC spent a great deal of money seven or so years ago to put in a parking lot on church-owned property. This required no zoning changes, and was properly permitted and inspected. Prior to this, all parking for the church was curbside, except for 10 small spaces off the gravel-covered alley in back of the church. While curbside parking was adequate decades ago when Westover Hill Boulevard was a two-lane road with little traffic, modern conditions created a situation that was dangerous for those who frequent the church or tot lot. Our newer parking has created a safer environment for members of the church, preschool families and patrons of the tot lot. If and when bike lanes are established on Westover Hills Blvd., our parking lot removes much of the former curbside parking, allowing greater safety for bikers. The programs of The Next Move will only operate between the hours of 8 a.m. and 1 p.m., Monday through Saturday, with only five or six students and two teachers as "staff." We anticipate much of the "traffic" for the bakery portion of the program that will be contained exclusively in the house at 1707 Westover Hills Blvd. will be foot traffic and community members who are already on church property, such as preschool families and patrons of the tot lot. We anticipate only a few cars at most at any one time when the bakery is open and our current parking lot provides ample space for this.

We regret that our neighbors to the rear of the church (on New Kent) can see and hear activity from our kitchen. Our facility is the same today as it was the day they purchased the home, and nothing about the footprint of the rear of the facility will change. I would imagine that any structure within close proximity to another would create a situation where awareness of activity would be present, though it would be difficult to see into our kitchen unless someone made an effort to do so. We have never received any complaints or had any neighbor approach us about activity in our kitchen. The kitchen has cinder block walls, and two non-operable windows which will be completely filled in with our upcoming renovation. The Next Move's occupancy of the kitchen during morning hours will be on a few students and two teachers at a time.

Our backdoor neighbor also referenced a streetlight that provides safety for those who use the church facility and for our neighbors. A few years ago, because of that streetlight and our security cameras, we were able to assist the Richmond Police Department with the arrest and prosecution of a person who stole copper downspouts from the house we own (and likely others). Balancing safety with privacy is always a challenge, but we feel that this light, like our other street lights, create a desirable level of safety in our neighborhood.

In summary, it is our desire to continue to be a good neighbor to our community and we are excited to be able to serve more diverse and vulnerable populations with our facility under its new uses. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Donna Holder

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