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Zoning board must protect area's history

AT ISSUE: Rutger Park not place to house a substance abuse recovery program

Observer-Dispatch

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UTICA — The Rescue Mission of Utica has been quite persistent in seeking to open a substance abuse recovery program in Rutger Park, which is arguably the most historic area of the city. Whatever the merits of the program, the location is wrong.

The city's Zoning Board of Appeals should reject the nonprofit agency's latest push to overcome neighborhood opposition to its plan.

This debate pits two important Utica needs against each other -- ending the scourge of drugs versus giving new life to a 19th-century neighborhood whose architecture speaks to Utica's past greatness and future potential. There are well-meaning individuals on both sides whose views should be respected, but careful examination of the arguments makes clear that the views of neighbors and preservationists take precedence.

Rutger Park was once home to U.S. Sen. Roscoe Conkling, one of the most powerful officials in Washington during the Reconstruction Era. President Ulysses S. Grant stayed there when visiting Conkling in Utica. Last year, a private property owner sold the buildings at 1 and 3 Rutger Park and the lot at 2 Rutger Park to the Landmarks Society of Greater Utica.

This was an enormously important step for a site that had been allowed to fall into disrepair. The state recently awarded a \$600,000 grant to the Landmarks Society toward its goal of creating "mansion museums" at Rutger Park. As group leader Michael Bosek said, "We have some stunning architecture here and we need to celebrate that."

The Rescue Mission's plan flies in the face of that. It has sought for some time now to place its 20-bed substance abuse program in the former Swancott Home for senior women at 4 Rutger Park, a stone's throw from the Conkling home. All the while, historic preservationists have challenged the nonprofit's overall plans for the surrounding neighborhood, particularly in regards to a separate program whose clients include former prisoners.

In the waning days of the Julian administration in 2007, the city indicated it supported the Rescue Mission's plan for the Swancott building. But a year ago, the Zoning Board of Appeals rejected the plan as not matching current zoning, leading to a lawsuit by the nonprofit. Now, the Rescue Mission is asking for a special use permit that would essentially negate the previous zoning board ruling.

The Rev. Bill Dodge, leader of the Rescue Mission, describes his agency's work as neighborhood revitalization, and he points to the high level of security his organization provides the neighborhood. But neighbors aren't buying it, and they're right. Rutger Park must exist in the future as a unified location devoted to celebrating Utica's history and preserving it in a way that attracts visitors, residents and investment.

Neighborhoods thrive when the impetus is for people to buy into the neighborhood, not opt out. Rightly or wrongly, placing a program for drug addicts in Rutger Park will devalue the historic effort now under way there.

Dodge is entitled to find a place for his programs, and Mayor David Roefaro should help him do so. Certainly, there are many in a city that's lost nearly half its population since World War II. But not in Rutger Park.

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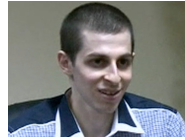
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