

February 20, 2022

Christian Belden
Executive Director
Church Community Housing
50 Washington Square
Newport, Rhode island 02840

Subj: Church Community Housing's Proposed West House II

Dear Mr. Belden:

At the meeting held at West House, on Wednesday, February 16, 2022, to discuss Church Community Housing's revised plans for construction of the proposed West House II affordable senior housing complex, I informed you that while only 25% of West House residents had signed the protest letter, dated February 1, 2022, to the Middletown Planning Board, others had wanted to sign but feared retaliation by management if they did so. You replied that any such fear on their parts was unfounded.

I want you (and the planning board) to know that on the Thursday and Friday following Wednesday's meeting, residents arrived at the West House management office for their annual lease renewal meetings. In that closed-door setting, isolated residents were handed an "I Support the West House II Project" paper and told upper management would like them to sign the show-of-support sheet, although under no obligation to do so.

If that isn't veiled intimidation, I don't know what is.

That aside, during your meeting on the 16th, you passed around an attendance sheet for West House attendees to sign. A while later, you passed around another sheet with the caption: "I Support the West House II Project" (or much the same language), and you asked attendees to sign that as well - likely the same sheet that turned up later in lease renewal meetings. After your meeting, one resident told me she thought she was signing the attendance sheet. Perhaps others made the same mistake. But that doesn't disturb me because almost all residents, including me, support the West House II project (for affordable housing), but remain firm in legitimate apprehension about 66 strangers and their guests (all of whom may not be 55 years of age - and even if they are) having keys and 24-hour access to West House, when such intrusive access isn't necessary or desirable.

Church Community Housing's newly revised plans show concessions on your part, particularly in the addition of community or common rooms for residents' use in the West House II building, when before there was none. If you need more common rooms, you could convert one of the 54 apartments to that purpose. You obligingly added more parking spaces from 61 to 77. Wow!

You say there is no creek at the back of the property affecting drinking water. I've seen the steady flow of water that is the lifeline for coyotes in the area, and I'm told that the stream extends over to BJ's/Dunkin and ends in the reservoir's water supply for the island. But, assuming that any creek out back does not flow into the island's drinking water, and that you're not required to have a 200-foot distance from it, and that the town has no problem with the complex being built over, or on top of, the upper portion of Enterprise Drive, a roadway that Joe Emmanuel at town hall informs me is owned by the town, then there appears only one issue remaining to achieve widespread West House residents' approval of the West House II project.

That critical issue involves providing keys and round-the-clock access to the West House I building to West House II residents (54 apartments - and 12 of them two-bedroom). You acknowledged that the major reason for providing such keys and access to the 66+ West House II residents (and their guests) is to permit West House II residents who may park in the front parking lot (Forest Avenue side) easy access to their building in the back.

This problem is readily solved, Mr. Belden. West House I has a lovely fenced, gated, lighted (safe) side yard with a paved walkway that residents can use to get from the Forest Avenue parking lot to West House II. I'll bet walking along the lane from the front lot to the new building is about the same number of steps as walking through West House's locked front door. You might even consider a canopy over the side-yard paved walkway to keep West House II residents dry during rainstorms.

Shopping carts are located in the outer unlocked entrances at West House I, both front and back vestibules, and those carts can be taken without needing any key or access to West House I. The shopping carts can be rolled along the paved walkway in the side yard and left at the unlocked rear entrance vestibule. All would have access to the grocery carts, which are very useful for carrying in groceries or moving in or out of the complex.

Under enabling legislation, if you have not achieved the program requirement of 80% of the apartments having at least one resident age 55 or older within one (1) year of operation (from date of opening), you lose your exemption from discrimination against families with children, and the West House II property falls to the general public for occupancy eligibility. Any income eligible person could live there. You say that won't be a problem because you have wait lists of seniors needing affordable housing. There's a wait list posted now at West House I that is updated only to add new applicants. It's a time-consuming process to write to applicants on a wait list to inquire about their continued interest. Many seniors on wait lists die, move away to live with children, or permanently relocate to nursing homes or assisted-living facilities. A wait list is not reliable and, further, being on a wait list is not a full or final determination of an applicant's eligibility.

Under 80/20 rules, you are permitted to rent to anyone you want for 20% of the 54 units, or about 11 of the apartments. You said you're not going to do that; that you plan to rent to only age 55 and above in all apartments (including spouses and disabled children). In the situation of a 55-year-old resident with a 53-year-old spouse, they would have to wait two years before applying, you said, which could be in violation of age discrimination laws under the RI Fair Housing Act.

In a situation of a 55-year-old resident with a disabled non-senior child, denying them occupancy could be in violation of both federal and state anti-discrimination laws on disability, especially where you are not required to admit age 55 and above for 20% of the units under the 80/20 rule. When I asked what you would do if you had four vacant apartments and nobody eligible under your occupancy plan, would you leave them vacant until you had an eligible applicant? Again you said that wouldn't happen because you have long wait lists. And if a court awarded a 55-year-old resident custody of her minor grandchild (as happened at the age-62 and above West House I), would she and the child be allowed to stay? You said 'No,' apparently believing you have more authority than the court.

The point, Mr. Belden, is that it is not cast in stone who would be eligible to live at West House II, and that being so there are consequences that could destroy the peace and safety that residents at West House I have enjoyed for many years.

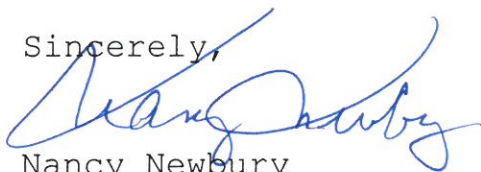
Those consequences include negative incidents that are known to accompany a generational mix of tenants, incidents documented against non-senior residents, especially the non-senior mentally impaired resident, incidents that include verbal and physical altercations, drug use and drug dealing, profanity, unruly guests, panhandling, noise disturbances, destruction of property, and public intoxication. Such negative incidents seriously affect the safety and security of elderly residents.

At your meeting on the 16th, one resident told you that in all the years she's lived at West House she has never looked through her door's peep-hole before opening it when someone knocks. Why would you want to change that, Mr. Belden? Another 89-year-old resident told you she has to exercise to remain healthy, but because she can't walk the parking lots because of coyotes or packs of coyotes in the front and back lots every day, she walks nights before bed around the corridors on her floor. She'd no longer do that, she said, with strangers in the building at night. Why should she be frightened, Mr. Belden?

Advisory opinions from agencies can be sought as to qualifying or disqualifying eligibility factors, but in the meanwhile would you kindly send me a copy of your Management Plan for the West House II location, and more specifically, your Occupancy or Eligibility Plan? I would like to compare that submitted plan with the guaranteed '*nobody under age 55*' assurances you gave West House I residents at your meeting on the 16th.

Thank you for convening the recent and productive meeting at West House and for providing residents a full copy of CCH's revised plans. Thank you for the concessions made. Please add my name in support of the new complex, noting my reservation regarding provision of keys and 24-hour access to West House II residents to the West House I building. I ask you to consider the reasonable alternative of using West House I's side yard and lighted paved walkway to give West House II residents access to their building from the Forest Avenue parking lot.

Sincerely,



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Copies to:

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and
Members of the Middletown Planning Board
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✓ Ronald M. Wolanski
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West House Management Office
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Information Copy:

RI State Representative Deb Ruggiero

RI State Senator Louis P. DiPalma