

March 25, 2022

Middletown Planning Board  
Attn: Paul A. Croce, Chairman  
Via: Ronald M. Wolanski, Dir., Planning Dept.  
Middletown Town Hall  
350 East Main Road  
Middletown, Rhode Island 02842

Subject: Planning Board Meeting - Wednesday, March 9, 2022

Reference: Church Community Housing's West House II Project

Dear Mr. Croce and Members of the Planning Board:

I was unable to attend the planning board's meeting on March 9<sup>th</sup> but was able to view the meeting on Zoom along with other West House residents. The board is now asked to address concerns of elderly residents at West House I as it addressed landowner concerns at its meeting on March 9<sup>th</sup>. Those concerns are the loss of safety and security that surely will follow lack of adequate parking space with Church Community Housing's proposal for West House II, and CCH's intention to provide unlimited key access and 24-hour entry to West House I to a multitude of younger West House II tenants and their guests.

RI General Laws 45-22-7 grants the Middletown Planning Board authority to protect West House I elderly residents from harm.

**RIGL 45-22-7 - Other duties of a planning board or commission:**

- (a) A planning board or commission established under the provisions of this chapter shall make studies and prepare plans and reports on the needs and resources of the community with reference to its physical, economic, and social growth and development as affecting the health, safety, morals, and general welfare of the people (emphasis added).

The studies, plans, and reports shall concern, but not necessarily be limited to, the following:

- (5) Problems of housing (emphasis added) and the development of housing programs.

Permit me to correct misconceptions by CCH's Christian Beldon. There are no "separate lounges for men and women" at West House as he told the planning board there are, unless he refers to public bathrooms off the 1<sup>st</sup> floor lobby. Also, the so-called 'under-utilized' common rooms at West House I, used by Mr. Beldon to justify providing 54 apartments of under-age West House II residents and their guests keys and unlimited entry to West House I, is due entirely to management's locking common rooms throughout the building the last two years in enforcing Covid-19 distancing guidelines. Further, whether common rooms are utilized sufficiently relates more to management failure to make rooms functional or inviting than it does to resident use.

For instance, the larger of the common rooms - a lunchroom on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor, is only recently unlocked. That room always filled up completely several days a week with reduced-fare lunches funded by the government and provided by local restaurant venues. It became under-utilized when West House's part-time management failed to renew contracts, secure additional funds, or find alternative venues for the luncheons that residents regularly attended, found nutritious and hearty, and enjoyed and looked forward to for social interactions.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> floor exercise room, that is not air-conditioned, is so cluttered with boxes and stacks of books and contains only three old and fairly useless pieces of exercise equipment that the majority of West House residents avoid the room.

Same with the 1<sup>st</sup> floor computer room, called the 'Mouse Trap.' Management departed from precedent in how the two connecting rooms that make up the Mouse Trap are utilized; the inner-most room is now kept locked, except for 15-hours in a 168-hour week, and that eliminates resident use of the best computer and monitors, the only color printer, other office machinery, and office supplies. In the outer room that is kept open to residents, a paper clip can't be found, and only one broken (lid does not attach) black and white printer that rarely has paper or ink is available for resident printing needs. And no longer are there any computer training classes for residents.

But, the point isn't whether there are under-utilized common rooms at West House, or if common rooms in the building might be rightly under-utilized. The question is whether a larger West House II community of under-age-62, and their guests, be permitted to invade the space and safety of the smaller and older community of seniors who now reside at West House I.

At his first meeting at West House, Christian Belden, executive director of Church Community Housing, tried to make a resident feel ungrateful for questioning why West House II tenants needed keys and unlimited access to West House I. He asked the elderly resident, *"Don't you feel grateful to live here,"* a question he would not have asked if the woman weren't of low or moderate income. He expressed his 'great disappointment' in a follow-up meeting that West House I residents didn't want to open their building to younger residents and their guests.

Mr. Belden felt no need at the board's March 9th meeting to respond to a West House resident's concern about insufficient parking spaces for the two properties. *"What is the plan for resident parking during snowstorms,"* Mark Hastings asked? *"And what happens if elderly residents can't find a parking space in either lot?"* Mark's suggestion that storage spaces planned for the basement of West House II could better be utilized for common rooms, so tenants didn't need key access to West House I, was met by Chairman Croce with: *"Are you almost finished?"* Mr. Hastings ended his presentation with another suggestion that instead of building 54 apartments - build 52 or 53 units and use that space for desired common rooms at West House II.

Chairman Croce responded to Mark's further suggestion, with Solicitor Regan nodding in agreement, that how management operates is not within the planning board's scope of review; *'that management's decision as to who will or will not have keys and access to West House I is not in the board's purview.'*

Earlier, Mr. Belden was permitted to speak at length about why the 66+ residents of the new complex and their guests should be entitled to have keys and unlimited access to West House I - even though studies point to the inherent dangers to the safety and well-being of frail seniors in any generational mixing of tenants. Nobody on the planning board interrupted Mr. Belden. Nobody asked if he were 'almost finished' in his remarks. And nobody on the Middletown Planning Board spoke about such things as 'scope of review' or 'purview' when Mr. Belden was at bat.

It is economic discrimination to place all emphasis on property rights and none on low-or-moderate-income tenant rights as the planning board did at its March 9<sup>th</sup> meeting. In addition, the disparate impact, however unintentional, of the board's 'not in our purview' position is clearly wrong considering 85% of West House I residents are women, and old women at that.

Board member Betty Jane Owen, in her efforts to safeguard the rights of West House neighbors to property value and privacy, was permitted to inquire how CCH management intends to operate the proposed complex. She asked Church Community Housing representatives if management would ensure that any dumpster would border a road and not a landowner's property, and she sought guarantees that a fence will be erected between the road and dumpsters, and that the proposed building, along with any additional parking spaces, will not be close to a southwest homeowner's property. Church Community provided the assurances.

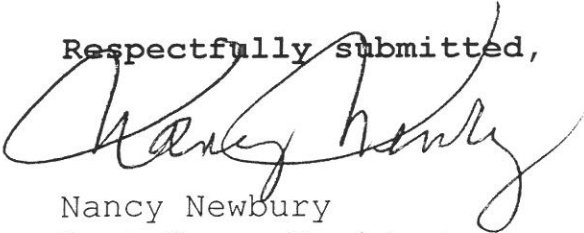
No member of the planning board, nor the town solicitor, saw the hypocrisy in looking at how management intends to run the complex where property and privacy rights of homeowners are concerned, while at the same time refusing to address privacy and safety considerations that affect low-or-moderate-income tenants. If board member Owen is the same Betty Jane Owen who owns a 4-bedroom, half-million-dollar property at 137 Forest, in the West House neighborhood, perhaps she should have recused herself from discussion or questions about landowner rights?

Many of the elderly living at West House have had to adjust to living in a building with so many others. For those who had to leave their own homes, it's been challenging. Add to that the increased noise, lack of privacy, and personal safety concerns that fifty-four additional apartments (12 of them 2-bedroom) with an underage-62 eligibility, and you end up with an elderly population at West House I that feels very vulnerable. Security cameras in front and rear vestibules do not record, and there is no way to know who will be entering or leaving the building.

I urge the Middletown Planning Board to require Church Community Housing to develop alternate solutions to giving keys and unlimited access to the West House I building to fifty-four apartments of tenants in the proposed West House II complex; and to report back to the planning board why either of the two solutions proposed by West House resident Mark Hastings (build fewer units or use planned storage spaces for common rooms) are not workable or satisfactory alternatives to Church Community Housing in safeguarding its elderly West House I population.

I also ask the planning board to require reasonable assurances from Church Community Housing that no elderly West House I resident with an automobile will be without a parking space.

Respectfully submitted,



Nancy Newbury  
West House Resident

Copies to:

MIDDLETOWN TOWN COUNCIL

Officers: President Paul M. Rodrigues, Vice President Thomas P. Welch III

Members: Christopher Logan, Terri Flynn, Dennis Turano, Barbara Von Villas, and M. Theresa Santos

Middletown Town Administrator Shawn J. Brown

Middletown Town Solicitor Peter Regan

✓ Middletown Planning Department Director Ronald M. Wolanski

CHURCH COMMUNITY HOUSING BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Officers; President Jennifer Murray, Vice President Barbara O'Reilly, Treasurer Robert M. Sabel, Secretary Marjorie E. Jensen

Members: Susan Bodington, Paul Murphy, Timothy Neary, Elizabeth Phelps, Brigid Ryan, Patricia Sargent, Karen Schmid

Christian Belden, Executive Director, Church Community Housing

Meghan Mauro, Phoenix Property Manager, West House I

Information Copies:

RI State Representative Deb Ruggiero

RI State Senator Louis P. DiPalma