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Homeless belong to the Community, too

The Catholic Charities Men’s Shelter has been in operation for over 40 years. Known as “the Ox” because of its previous location on Oxford Street, the shelter has served the homeless at 1074 S. Clinton Street for the past seven years. Our current building is now part of an economic development opportunity, with JMA Wireless committing to create a vibrant campus to expand its 5G business. Recognizing the transformative nature of the JMA project in terms of new jobs and economic growth for the city and the county, Catholic Charities willingly made the decision to relocate the emergency shelter to pave the way for this new campus. The task at hand: find a new home for the homeless.

As we started our search, we wanted to find a location that would enable us to provide enhanced services to the homeless and housing vulnerable. We envisioned a “Housing Services Center” that would not only include the emergency shelter, but six apartments for frail individuals, a culinary job training program, on-site health and mental health services, and some 40 professional housing services staff, all located in the same building. Working in close collaboration with the city and the county, Catholic Charities vetted 15 different properties before assessing that 501 W. Genesee Street was a feasible site for this Center. However, we wanted to hear from neighborhood residents and community members before furthering any plans.

Catholic Charities conducted four community meetings to hear directly from neighbors about the proposed project. Neighbors expressed their concerns and strong opposition to the project being located at 501 W. Genesee Street. We carefully considered their feedback and as the community meetings concluded, we suspended all of our development activities related to that site. We continued vetting another dozen priorities before a local developer, Jim Ranalli, stepped forward and offered us his assistance. Through his help, we are making progress in finding the best location.

As we moved away from 501 W. Genesee Street, Common Councilor Pat Hogan offered his praise for the efforts of the neighborhood to oppose the plan, stating: “We want to defend our neighborhood.” It was both a telling and troubling comment.

It is important to remember that the homeless individuals being “defended” against come from our community. Before they became homeless, they were living in our neighborhoods and towns. A chain of unfortunate events, circumstances, and choices brought them to the threshold of our shelter. Over the past year, we have served individuals in our shelter from every zip code in the City of Syracuse. These individuals are still residents of our community and, as such, they are the constituents of every Common Councilor. They deserve the same level of representation as any other constituent.

As Catholic Charities continues its search for a new home for the homeless, my hope is that we can count on the Common Council to help our former neighbors who now find themselves homeless, rather than planning strategies to defend against them.

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