

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Common-sense zoning for Rush Oak Park



by Center West Oak Park Neighborhood Association

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Rush Oak Park and West Suburban hospitals both are located in residential areas, but the village's zoning ordinance has oddly different standards for each institution.

In the West Suburban hospital district, the area adjacent to or abutting homes has a maximum allowable height of 50 feet, which is proportional to the 30-foot maximum in the neighborhood.

But in the Rush Oak Park district, the maximum height of the east section, adjacent to or abutting homes, is 80 feet, while the maximum in the south section, adjacent to or abutting homes, is a towering 125 feet.

On May 4, the Plan Commission will consider Zoning Ordinance amendments that would re-establish similar standards for both campuses. The maximum height on the east and south sections of Rush Oak Park's campus would be lowered to 50 feet. Also, modest increases in setbacks would ensure that any new buildings would scale into the neighborhood, reducing shadows and other negative effects.

The height limit in the center of Rush Oak Park's campus, which is sufficiently set back from the neighborhood, would remain at 125 feet — the same limit that applies to the heart of West Suburban's campus.

These zoning changes would help preserve the character of the surrounding neighborhood without handcuffing Rush Oak Park from future development. The Center West Oak Park Neighborhood Association is urging the Plan Commission and village board to pass these common-sense reforms.

For more than a century, Oak Park Hospital has provided exceptional health care, high quality jobs, and economic development to Oak Park and other western suburbs. But homeowners have paid a steep cost as the hospital has continued to encroach into their neighborhood.

Since 2000, the hospital has bought and bulldozed about 15 houses and buildings in the 500 block of Wenonah Avenue and the 600 blocks of Wisconsin and Maple avenues. Homes and green space have given way to asphalt parking lots and a five-story medical office building.

Most recently, the village board rubber-stamped the hospital's request to build a seven-story parking garage, big enough for 713 cars. The hospital shelved the garage during the COVID pandemic. But it has since bought and bulldozed several houses on Maple Avenue for a parking lot. Meanwhile, the 500 block of Wenonah Avenue (where the garage was to be located) and the southern and western borders of the hospital campus on Maple remain ripe for development.

Without reasonable height limits, Rush can build to the sky and unleash traffic and congestion — without developing mitigation plans or even informing neighbors. The village should welcome these zoning changes, which give the village the ability to negotiate these critical boundaries.

The Zoning Ordinance allows flexibility. If the hospital were to propose a project that exceeded the revised height limits, it could petition the village for a zoning variance. In such a case, residents then would be guaranteed a voice in what could be a win-win process that would allow the hospital to grow and prosper while protecting the integrity of the neighborhood.

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