

Thanh Dang

From: Susan Foster <sm51foster@gmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, April 13, 2022 10:24 AM
To: Thanh Dang
Subject: Opposition to special use permit, 293 Newman Avenue

WARNING: This email was sent from outside of your organization.

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to register concern about the Special Use permit for a STR at 293 Newman Avenue made by owner Bradley Cohen.

My husband and I live directly across Newman Avenue at 296 Newman and have enjoyed the historic residential area of Harrisonburg, often referred to as Old Town, since 1997. Our choice of location 25 years ago was informed by our lifetimes of living in and improving older homes throughout the Shenandoah Valley. We were attracted to and continue to want to remain at the corner of Newman and Ott as a neighborhood with an eclectic mix of owners who enjoy older homes; we have resisted the urban flight of so many of our neighbors and friends with our commitment to the stewardship of owning a home over 100 years old.

The PC Memorandum that accompanies Mr. Cohen's request notes that "...the Comprehensive Plan designates this site as Neighborhood Residential. These areas are typically older residential neighborhoods, which contain a mixture of densities and a mixture of housing types, *but should have more single-family detached homes than other types of housing.*" This memorandum goes on to recommend approval of the special use request.

Over the last decade our immediate neighborhood (Water Street/Newman Avenue) has seen the addition of Urban Exchange, destruction of 3 small residences for a parking lot, the transition from Gravity Group to Urgie's restaurant, the addition of child care at Muhlenberg's activity building, and the evolution of single family residences to rental units on the western half of Newman.

I would respectfully submit that this subsection of the Urban Residential zone has met and exceeded the city's long term goal of higher density and tax revenue generation. Approval of this apparently low impact request will set a precedent that makes such special uses no longer 'special' but 'standard'. There is also the transfer of this special use to any future owners whose best interest may not reflect those of the current owner.

I would further request that the Planning Commission hear the voices of the city residents wanting to resist the transition of our neighborhood into a revenue generating opportunity, referred to as 'positive economic impact' in Mr. Cohen's application. A true neighborhood offers a safe environment for pursuing individual and community interests, not all of which can be measured with city or individual revenue.

Thank you for an opportunity to express our views on this proposal. While it seems that this hearing will be a formality prior to approval, I would hope the Planning Commission continues to value the perspective of long term residents of the city as much as a part of a diverse culture as are the newest residents and the universities.

Susan M. Foster
296 Newman Avenue

Thanh Dang

From: Stuart Sherwood <stusherwood3@gmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, April 13, 2022 1:41 PM
To: Thanh Dang
Subject: Special Use Permit for 293 Newman Ave

WARNING: This email was sent from outside of your organization.

To whom it may concern,

First, please allow me to share my neighbors' and my concern about the most obvious issue regarding Mr Cohen's proposal. One has to admit, a childless, single real estate professional purchasing a 6-7 bedroom home close to the stadium and downtown bars, and then immediately seeking a special use permit for short term rental smacks of a larger business plan given JMU's imminent move to Division 1 sports. It doesn't take much imagination to see this morphing into something where eventually he quietly vacates the property and converts it into a short-term rental house on football weekends, with fraternity reunions ensuing. I was surrounded by such properties when I lived in (and consequently left) downtown Savannah, GA and I saw up-close how owners there schemed to get around the city in order to create such businesses. For that reason we would like assurances that the owner be monitored as being present during rental transactions and not be allowed to expand rentals into the main house. Were he to do so we feel would be a strong sign of the intention to transition the property. The city's description of "owner" and "operator" are quite vague on this matter, and that's concerning to all of us.

Second, I'd like to add some personal thoughts as one who has called old town my hometown for 45 years.

A community's oldest housing stock is often its best hope of demonstrating sustainable living and keeping local professionals actually interested in city improvement. I've never understood, then, why owners are allowed to rent to students in old town and create eyesores in plain sight off Mason and Main. Given this tolerance by the city, it should be surprise that short-term rentals appear to be yet one more way to exploit and degrade what used to be the face of the city. It's an excellent example of The Tragedy of the Commons—only what's endangered is ethos and community reputation, not grass.

My years in Savannah provided me with plenty of opportunities to observe the impacts of the STR model as it grew there. I watched it transform whole blocks of the historic district in the early going, effectively converting them into commercial zones composed of disruptive strangers. Savannah is obviously an extreme example of the impacts of tourism, but what is universal here is that while full-time residents in historic neighborhoods do the work of creating that ethos and charm visitors seek, the short term landlords (particularly if absent) in effect extract and sell the investments of others to those who have little motivation to conduct themselves in a neighborly fashion. The charm I'm referring to doesn't come cheap as I'm sure you're aware, for as anyone who's lived in one of these older houses knows, it's part indulgence, part curatorial service to the community and full-time labor and expense. All that we ask for in return is governance that appreciates our role and efforts and recognizes that charm requires cultivation and protection.

Thank you,

Stuart Sherwood
120 Ott Street