

Riding One-Trick Pony

To the Editor:

The Committee to Save St. Paul's certainly has had their share of disagreements with John Mauk over the years. But we agree with him on one thing: the debate over the future of St. Paul's should not be based on attacks on his character. While we continue to question the wisdom of his judgment, we take him at his word when he says that he has no involvement in his employer's business dealings with AvalonBay, and likewise accept at face value his assertion that he derives "no personal benefit" from those extensive business dealings.

We also agree with Mr. Mauk that Village residents should stay focused on the central issue of figuring out how to save the historic St. Paul's building. Where we part company, however, is in his assumption that his way is the only way. It's just not so, no matter how many times he says it.

Mr. Mauk has not been reticent in voicing his opinion that the AvalonBay giveaway is "the only feasible alternative." Giving him every benefit of the doubt, the best case he can make is that AvalonBay is prepared to step into the Village's shoes and preserve the building at "minimal" direct cost to taxpayers. But the devil is in the details. As outlined by AvalonBay, it is willing to do so only on terms that give Village residents almost nothing in return, except for a pretty facade to look at. No lease payments for the entire term of the 99 year lease. Ridiculously low PILOT payments in lieu of taxes. Lots of new construction. Lots of new congestion, traffic, and parking problems for the fields. It's so bad that it has many residents thinking about just tearing the building down. We shudder at the thought that either of these extreme alternatives is even being considered.

Are the choices presented by Mr. Mauk truly the "only feasible alternatives"? Both common sense and history tell us this can't be the case. Fifteen years ago, the Village Board considered, and rejected, a feasible plan to move Village Hall to St. Paul's. It was foolishly rejected in favor of a plan that resulted in the ill-fated CareMatrix assisted living fiasco. That plan, as many residents recall, was judged to be illegal shortly before CareMatrix went bankrupt. Can you imagine the mess the plan would have caused had a bankruptcy judge decided to auction off St. Paul's to pay off CareMatrix's creditors? On the other hand, had the Village gone ahead with the original plan to move Village Hall to St. Paul's, the renovation would have been completed a decade ago, and the cost of the move would be but a distant memory. That was mistake number one.

Mistake number two was made under the tenure of Mayor Barbara Miller a few years ago. Despite her best efforts, which were supported by three of her fellow trustees, she was unable to obtain the requisite super-majority vote to move the Village Library to St. Paul's. Again, there wasn't a real issue whether the plan was feasible. It was a practical, smart, and efficient solution. But it didn't mesh with the goals of trustees like Mr. Mauk, whose mind-set wanted nothing less than to see a private developer step up and take over the building, ostensibly at "no cost" to taxpayers. Instead of working with his fellow trustees on a plan that would have preserved the

building for the community, he sided with three other trustees to prevent the residents from even having the opportunity to vote on the Library plan.

More than a year ago, he told the residents, in no uncertain terms, that the ONLY solution to St. Paul's, except for demolition, was to turn St. Paul's into a privately owned condominium development. A well-paid consultant, K. Backus, actively promoted this approach. Her work was wasted. The Committee to Save St. Paul's effectively demonstrated that private ownership was not only unnecessary, but also foolhardy, and the current desperate state of condominium development in this region simply validates our position.

Mauk's latest plan, promoting AvalonBay, is widely derided as excessive overdevelopment and a giveaway of valuable public parkland. Yet, in the face of widespread opposition, he continues to pretend that his main goals are to preserve the main building and protect Village taxpayers. Mr. Mauk, unfortunately, has been riding his one-trick pony for years, but he has yet to acknowledge, and he has been unwilling to give serious consideration to any plan but his own.

Of course, as many of our residents are now aware, the proposed AvalonBay deal actually carries some very significant costs, and can result in some very significant additional burdens on the taxpayers. AvalonBay is trying to hide, or downplay them, but they are there. Demolition, likewise, has a major cost attached to it. And we are the first to admit that preservation is not a cost free alternative.

But where does that leave us? As concerned residents who have devoted countless hours of time to the cause of saving St. Paul's for public use, we are convinced it is possible to develop a feasible plan to save the historic building at an affordable cost.

Given the current economic climate, we believe that it does not make sense to rush headlong into a choice that will shackle the residents with a plan that we will have to live with forever -- AvalonBay is 99 years and demolition is irreversible. Clearly, this has gone on for a long time, but these are uncharted financial times. We think the much smarter choice is to eliminate the AvalonBay plan as a bad plan, and then navigate carefully through the current economic downturn to find an appropriate solution. We know that the imagination and resourcefulness of our residents will steer us to that goal.

The Executive Committee of The Committee to Save St. Paul's
Peter Negri, Ed Keating, Michael Ciaffa and Frank McDonough