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Office of Regional Affairs

Meeting with McKownville Improvement Association

Date: 8/3/2011

Place: Guilderland Town Hall

Issue: Purchase of Holt-Harris Property

2011
Meeting w/
Governor
rep.

Background: SUNY Albany is purportedly considering a purchase of 9 acres of property in the hamlet of McKownville known as the Holt-Harris property. The land, which is zoned residential, borders the University on the south and is on the northern edge of McKownville. SUNY Albany President George Philip has met with Donald Reeb - head of the McKownville Improvement Association and former SUNY Albany professor - as well as other members of the association, and has said as much as the university is "interested in purchasing the property at the right price." While the community group continually speculated throughout the meeting about the likelihood of the university purchasing the property and their intentions with the land, this is the only concrete information they have received from the university regarding the property. The Holt-Harris family's listing price for the property at \$1.6 million, with assessment value at only \$597 thousand, is perceived by the community group as being a political price point catering to a purchaser willing to pay far above the market value - i.e. the university.

Request: Mr. Reeb's request was essentially two pronged: first, that the university not purchase the property under any circumstances; and second that the Governor take steps to allow the university to access land on the Harriman campus, thereby alleviating the need to buy the Holt-Harris property. We pointed out in the meeting that these two issues are connected tenuously at best, as the university would likely still have interest in the Holt-Harris property with or without access to the Harriman campus. The proposal laid out by Mr. Reeb and the community association was for the university (or someone) to build "profit making" dorms on the Harriman campus. This way the city, county, and other property taxing jurisdictions would receive property tax revenues - while alleviating community tensions by building in a non-residential area. This idea has apparently been floating around since 1998. No one seems to know the reasons behind that lack of traction on this front; however the suggestion floated at the meeting was that Mayor Jennings is opposed to the idea for obvious tax reasons.

Concern: There is understandably a great deal of concern from the community, which seemingly stems from a general lack of information about the university's intentions, as well their understanding that they ultimately don't have much leverage over the university. This is a private seller, selling to a willing buyer on the open market. The university does not need the neighborhood's permission to buy the land and of course is not subject to zoning or other locally administered land use regulations. The university also recently went through the planning process and has subsequently broke ground on the Liberty Dorm near Tudor Road which caused considerable friction with that community. Mr. Reeb also pointed to newspaper clippings he

brought from the early sixties (the time which the University was established) which show the assistant to the president of the university at the time promising that no private homes would be taken. There was also talk at the meeting of the University at Albany Foundation buying the property. The foundation is a non-for profit corporation whose purpose is to "encourage philanthropic contributions from individuals, corporations, foundations, and other organizations in support of activities and programs of the University at Albany." Whatever red tape the university itself would encounter in purchasing the property would likely not apply to the foundation which also concerns the community. Finally, the community is concerned about the precedent the purchase would set as it would be the first time that the university purchased property to expand outside the ring road, which was always understood by both sides to be the buffer zone between the community and the university.

Our Response: We told Mr. Reeb and the community association that we would relay their position and concerns to the Governor. We also said that they should draft and provide us with a written position paper. We also suggested that they get their political representation from top to bottom to write to the Governor on the issue. Finally, the association asked if we could assist in providing information regarding the university's intentions.