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By Kerry C. Regan and Mike Thompson

## **Stop Hospital Sprawl**

Hospital sprawl occurs when large institutions expand in ways that are inappropriate to their neighborhoods. It's the opposite of smart growth. And it's what Highland Hospital is pursuing when it says it wants to buy residential property to grow its footprint in the Highland Park Neighborhood.

To retain the residential nature of the neighborhood that we live in, that the hospital benefits from, and that thousands of visitors enjoy every year, the hospital needs to stay within its current footprint. If it can't do that, it needs to build on a site that doesn't include the neighborhood's residential property.

Let's be clear. Highland Hospital is a great facility—ranked No. 3 in Rochester and No. 23 in New York State by *US News and World Report*. To continue to be the great and caring healthcare provider that it is, the hospital needs to modernize occasionally. Sometimes that requires expansion, and according to the hospital this is one of those times.

The Highland Park Neighborhood is great, too—diverse, rich in history, scaled for walkability, full of engaged citizens and locally-owned businesses, and host to a range of city- and county-wide happenings in the park and surrounding environs. It's one of a handful of particularly desirable neighborhoods in the city. To retain its greatness, we need to be disciplined and smart about the way we grow.

We also recognize that part of the appeal of urban neighborhoods is that residents and businesses and institutions and parks are situated close to one another, sharing limited space. To retain a suitable balance and scale, the needs of one cannot outweigh the needs of the others.

### **The Hospital's Expansion Plan**

The issue is the hospital's expansion plan—still a work in progress, according to hospital officials. We know from reading their annual report that they are spending \$1 million this year toward "site analysis and planning studies as the first steps in our Master Facility Plan."

Recently, in early May, they revealed to *City Newspaper*, the *Democrat and Chronicle* and a few neighborhood representatives that the hospital plans a two-story, 30,000 square foot expansion in what is currently a parking lot between the

back of the hospital and Bellevue Drive, with a target completion date of 2018. The structure will upgrade and expand many patient care resources and reportedly will not change activity levels on the hospital campus. However, the precise form the new structure will take is still in development.

What is NOT still in development is the hospital's plan to acquire neighborhood property. The hospital closed on the residence at 27 Bellevue Drive Jan. 15. It put an offer in last year on the bed and breakfast at 428 Mount Vernon Avenue, at the opposite end of Bellevue Drive. And it has released public statements that it is interested in continuing to buy neighborhood residences to meet office space needs—yet still retain the neighborhood's residential character. (In case you missed it, that's an oxymoron. Office space cannot be residential.)

These acquisition efforts began well before the hospital let the public or the neighbors know about their expansion plan. Too, these efforts are apparently being undertaken well before the new long-term master facility plan is in place.

That's ominous.

Further, explanations of the hospital's plans for these properties have been curious. As of this writing, hospital officials have coalesced around saying the space is for offices. The initial explanations offered to neighbors after the 27 Bellevue Drive purchase were less definitive. They didn't know what they were going to do with it—possibly rent it out, use it for storage or leave it vacant.

Even more curious: these explanations line up very well with a common hospital expansion strategy of acquiring neighboring properties over time, leading to neighborhood destabilization and, eventually, accumulation of enough property to accommodate expansion. A how-to guide for orchestrating this type of slippery-slope hospital expansion is detailed in *Parking Professional Magazine* article, here (<http://bit.ly/1s7dK7j>).

### **Precedents of Hospital Sprawl**

We've seen similar patterns with other Rochester hospitals. Strong Hospital, like Highland, owned by the University of Rochester, has contributed to a loss of the owner-occupied, residential character of the Upper Mount Hope Neighborhood for decades.

Genesee Hospital purchased property in the Monroe Avenue neighborhood and demolished houses to build a parking garage that it abandoned a few years later when the hospital closed. At the time, officials said it closed because Rochester had too much hospital capacity. Today that closing is a reason why the city needs more hospital space, Highland Hospital officials stated in *City Newspaper*.

Further, the University of Rochester, Highland Hospital's parent institution, shows little evidence of complementing its humanitarian mission with sensitivity to

neighbors and urban landscapes, with growth plans that have diminished the residential character of McLean Street and Wilson Boulevard, as well as the Upper Mount Hope Neighborhood.

What it adds up to is this: Highland Hospital is asking us to believe that the result of a \$1 million master facility plan study is a recommendation that the hospital buy up three or six or eight or 10 100-year-old houses scattered around the neighborhood and retool them as offices. To put it politely, that's not credible.

### **Make Your Voice Heard**

The hospital will continue to roll out its expansion plan, and neighbors will respond to it as details become available. But we don't need to wait to object to the hospital's plan to acquire residential property in the neighborhood. Surely, their \$1 million master plan can outline suitable alternatives.

Keep in mind, however, that as the city's No. 1 employer, the University of Rochester has a lot of clout. They will likely need strong encouragement to identify and pursue alternatives. A unified, purposeful voice from our neighborhood can play a role. Please make your voice heard. If you agree that we need to retain the residential character of the neighborhood, please sign the online petition at [www.defendurbanneighborhoods.org](http://www.defendurbanneighborhoods.org). And don't be shy about spreading the word.

Let's eliminate the possibility of hospital sprawl in our neighborhood and help Highland Hospital find a smarter path for its growth.

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