



SOCIETY HILL CIVIC ASSOCIATION

THE RESIDENT NEWSLETTER

313 Pine Street

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106

June 1973

EVERYTHING YOU EVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT BENEZET*

*But were too up-tight to ask

The next membership meeting on Monday, June 11th, 8-10:30 p. m., at Old Pine Presbyterian Church, will be one of the most important of the year. It will consist of a discussion of the Benezet Corporation proposal to build 19 low and moderate income apartment units at 6th and Lombard and 6th and Panama. Benezet will restate the proposal made at the last meeting after which the opposition will make its critique. The issue then will be open for discussion by the membership.

A vote, supervised by the American Arbitration Association, will be held on June 14 and 15 from 4 to 9 at Old Pine Presbyterian Church to decide whether the SHCA should approve the project. If approved, Benezet will take its proposal to the Redevelopment Authority. If disapproved, the project will be abandoned.

★★HOW IT ALL STARTED

It's a big stakes referendum and the background is complicated. The whole affair began at a membership meeting in the fall of 1971, when a member of SHCA, Len Bachman, reported that seven black, mostly elderly families, long-time residents of the neighborhood, were about to be evicted from their homes in the 600 block of Lombard Street by the Octavia Hill Association which had been nominated by the Redevelopment Authority as the developer of the tract. Octavia Hill is committed to rebuild the structures as high-priced rental units. At that meeting the membership voted to appoint a committee to study ways of keeping the seven families (now six) in the neighborhood. The committee was chaired by Philip Price.

Over the next few months the committee researched the problem and came up with a single solution -- 19 units of low and moderate income subsidized rental housing. The financing for the original project would come from the federal government under its Title 236 regulations.

Realizing the proposal was controversial and beyond the bounds of the charge originally given the committee, the board of SHCA held a meeting of neighbors within a four block radius of the project and asked them to vote on the proposal. It was approved.

The proposal was next submitted to the general membership of the Society Hill Civic Association and again approved by a substantial margin.

Following this, a private non-profit group was formed called Benezet Court, Inc. (after a Colonial-period benefactor). Its concern was to provide the administrative machinery to build and supervise the project. Its directors all had to live in a four block area of the project.

★★OPPOSITION BEGINS TO MOUNT

While Benezet was going about its planning, an opposition organization was also forming. It called itself the Society Hill West Civic Association and consisted of people in the neighborhood who strongly opposed the housing project, many of whom said they were unaware of the original votes and plans. The group held its own referendum and announced that the results were overwhelmingly against the plan.

Along the way the new civic group decided to have its members join SHCA and run its own slate of candidates for officers and board at the Association's annual meeting in 1973. The election was hotly contested. The SHCA slate, headed by Paul Putney, won against SHWCA's slate, headed by George Axilbund.

One of Putney's platform pledges, subsequently endorsed by Axilbund, was that since Benezet had become such a controversial issue, a new referendum would be held before the issue came before the Redevelopment Authority.

The vote was scheduled for some time in February. Before the matter had a chance to come up, President Nixon announced that he was suspending the federal programs which would have financed the construction and Benezet sought other financing. Both sides agreed to postpone a vote until such financing could be found.

★★BENEZET GETS TO THE NITTY-GRITTY

In May, Benezet announced that it had found new financing from the state and requested a chance to present its plans to the membership. The specifics were outlined at the May 29th meeting by Bill Leatherbee, Vice-President of Benezet:

"The Pa. Dept. of Community Affairs and the Pa. Housing Finance Agency have indicated commitments for financing are forthcoming. Construction costs are estimated to be \$314,000, land costs \$18,050 and development costs \$46,805, with a total cost of \$378,855.

"The apartment buildings, with one, two and three bedroom units, are planned with courtyards, off-street parking and landscaping. Brick exteriors and interior design will meet the standards applied by the Redevelopment Authority to private developers. The Corporation plans to request that the Redevelopment Authority nominate it as sponsor at its June meeting.

"The community corporation plans to offer five apartments at prevailing market rents to make possible the renting of most apartments at prices low and moderate income residents can pay. Tenant selection and management are to be controlled by the community sponsors with priority given to present or recent residents of Society Hill. There are 21 applicants from the community, six of whom are families living in the Octavia Hill properties under threat of eviction."

★★A STORMY CROSS-EXAMINATION

Following this presentation, there was intense questioning by the membership, although formal rebuttal will be invited by the opposition on June 11th. Principal questions concerned the nature of the financing of the proposed development. George Axilbund felt that the announced financing was hypothetical. He proposed a motion that a referendum on Benezet be postponed until the financing question was cleared up. The motion was ruled out of order at that meeting but it is conceivable that it will be reintroduced, recognized, and voted upon at the next meeting. There were also questions about the construction cost and parking.

The meeting ended amidst feverish cries to "impeach the President".

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In the democratic tradition, the best way for the membership to reach an intelligent decision is by an orderly and full discussion of all the facts. The June 11 meeting will be devoted entirely to consideration of the Benezet proposal. That meeting will open at 8 p. m. with an explanation of the procedures to be followed in the meeting and referendum. Benezet Court, Inc. will be offered 20 minutes for a recap of its proposal. Opponents of the proposal will then be given 20 minutes to present their point of view. After questions from the floor and a full floor discussion and debate, Benezet and then the opponents will each be given 5 minutes for a closing statement. The meeting will adjourn at 10:30.

★★THE VOICE OF THE BALLOT BOX

Voting on the proposal is scheduled for Thursday, June 14th and Friday, June 15th at Old Pine Street Presbyterian Church from 4:00 p. m. to 9:00 p. m. each day. To be eligible to vote you must be a member of the Society Hill Civic Association before 8:00 p. m. on Monday, June 11th. Identification (driver's license or similar cards) will be required at the poll.

The voting will be supervised by the National Center for Dispute Settlement of the American Arbitration Association. Proponents and opponents will each be invited to designate three observers who will be permitted inside the polling area.

The ballot will state the issue in the following manner:

"Benezet Court, Inc., a non-profit corporation, proposes to provide not more than nineteen (19) apartment units of low and moderate income housing, consisting of ten (10) units in two (2) buildings at the NW corner of Sixth and Lombard Streets and nine (9) units in three (3) buildings at the SW corner of 6th and Panama Streets. As to those apartments which are to be offered at rental rates substantially lower than market rates, priority will be given to people who are either present or recent residents of Society Hill."

The ballot will give each voter the opportunity to indicate that he or she favors the proposal, opposes it or takes no position on it.

The results of the balloting will be announced in two forms. Because of regulations which are still binding, the vote of members who live within the Project Area Committee (PAC) boundaries will be announced. The vote of the entire Civic Association will also be announced. The Board and Officers are committed to abiding by the decision of the entire Association.

[For those who may not recall, the Association boundaries follow the mid-lines of Front, Walnut, Eighth and Lombard Streets. The PAC area excludes from that area the following three blocks: Seventh to Eighth between Lombard and Addison; Sixth to Seventh between Spruce and South Washington Square; and West Washington Square to Eighth between Locust and Walnut. Actions by the Board of Directors and the Redevelopment Authority aimed at making the PAC and Association boundaries coincide are proceeding, but cannot be brought to a conclusion for several more months.]



If you have not joined the SHCA this year, get your application and check to Treasurer Mark Kessler, c/o 313 Pine Street, by 8 p. m. on June 11th. (\$4 for an individual, \$6 for a family, or waiver of dues may be requested.) Then come debate June 11th and come cast your ballot, June 14 or 15 -- Old Pine Presbyterian Church.