

Sign-ups preceded ballpark vote

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A woman in a red knit cap offered to pay the membership dues of strangers as they arrived at St. John's Episcopal Church for a neighborhood vote on a ballpark for Shockoe Bottom. Nearly 40 people joined the Church Hill Association at the door Tuesday night, with the dues of 24 paid by Church Hill resident Debra Clarke.

By secret ballot, members voted 62-44, with two abstentions, against the proposed Shockoe Center development.

During the discussion, Clarke spoke in support of the \$363 million development that would include hotels, restaurants, offices, residences and a \$60 million ballpark. She and others protested a motion to put off the vote to another meeting. Clarke said she was trying to get more people involved in the ballpark discussion, including those who could not afford the organization's \$25 dues. She said she lives at Church Hill House, an apartment complex for senior, disabled and handicapped residents, and is on a fixed income. "You have people who are hungry, who are homeless. This ballpark will mean economic generation for this community," she said.

Clarke said she had been knocking on doors and presenting a letter supporting the development and encouraging people to join the Church Hill Association. She said Richmond attorney Albert W. Thweatt II contacted her and offered to provide money for the membership fees on the condition she not ask them to vote one way or the other.

But Thweatt was emphatic yesterday he was not involved in Clarke's efforts and did not know about the vote until reading about it.

Yesterday, Clarke maintained Thweatt's involvement. "All I know is that one of his assistants brought the money to me . . . and his business card," Clarke said. "I started off with the best of intentions. That's all I can say."

Pete Boisseau, a spokesman for the Shockoe Center developers, said the group has no connection to Clarke or Thweatt and was unaware of dues-paying. Resident Polly Cole said she saw Clarke pay for four memberships after calling out "free memberships" as people arrived. Printed signs also directed residents to Clarke. "The very first perception you have is someone is buying votes," Cole said.

The group's bylaws state that membership is open to "everyone living in and/or working in the St. John's Church Old and Historic District, other residents living and/or working in the East District, and to other interested persons."

"All civic associations need to be open to everyone, and we are," said Randolph Bell, a Church Hill resident and a critic of the ballpark plan. "That said, those institutions should be as representative as possible."

Despite Clarke's claim that new members were free to vote for or against the ballpark development, Bell said it was clear that many, if not all, of the new members supported the project.

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