

Weather for Kingston
Sunny
Time: 9:00 am
Temp: 74
RealFeel Temp: 80
Humidity: 76
Winds: SSW at 3 mph

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Kingston residents divided over Alms House zoning

KINGSTON – The Kingston Common Council chamber was filled Thursday night, for a public hearing regarding a proposed spot zoning change for the Alms House property at 300 Flatbush Avenue.



Citizens evenly split on what to do with the Alms House

The current R zoning for single family use needs to be changed to R-6 multi-family dwelling to accommodate RUPCO's plans to convert the historic landmark into assisted housing for seniors and disabled adults.

The speakers were evenly divided on the issues, with hecklers interrupting speakers from both sides. Several of those expressing support identified themselves as tenants of the developer from outside of town.

Discussions presented by residents weighed the benefits of providing for the needs of elderly and infirmed, versus tax revenue and neighborhood NIMBY objections. Opponents repeatedly suggested instead changing the zoning to a commercial shopping district.

Originally built as the city poor house, the property went through several use changes and vacant periods, most recently serving as the Ulster County Health Department office, before getting shuffled back into privatization through the STRIVE initiative.

As one of the oldest public buildings in Kingston, all agree that the Alms House property cannot continue as a single-family residence, moving forward.

Gerald Benjamin said that rezoning the property is fundamental to its preservation. As associate vice president for Regional Engagement and director of the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz, he served as consultant to the city for developing a plan to adjust commercial property tax rates.



Alms House (RUPCO photo)

"I'm very familiar with the building, because I was chairman of the Ulster County legislature, while we had offices in that building. I have some knowledge of the great difficulty in making it function, in those days," Benjamin said. "We need to understand that this kind of activity does not advance crime; we are not talking about a homeless shelter."

Richard Cahill Jr., a former mayoral candidate, took umbrage at RUPCO representatives warnings of litigation made toward the common council Tuesday night. "Kingston has a history of caring about people, but we also don't put up with threats, he said.

"Our ancestors stood up to King George and the British troops, even when they burned this city to the ground. We didn't bow down to pressure then, and we sure as hell aren't going to bow down to King RUPCO and their army of attorneys," Cahill said.

RUPCO president Kevin O'Connor provided statistics that showed 61 percent of Kingston residents are struggling with the cost of living, almost 15,000 people. "Let's remember that by law, cities must consider the regional housing need. A city that accepts federal dollars in the form of CDBG money each year, has a stringent duty to affirm fair housing, including people with disabilities, and seniors," he said.

The Law and Rules Committee meets again next Thursday, June 15, followed by the upcoming common council on July 11.

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