

**CITY OF UNIVERSITY HEIGHTS, OHIO**

**COUNCIL OF THE WHOLE MINUTES**

**December 9, 2021**

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**Agenda Items**

**1. Roundtable Discussion of the sensitivities and needs of the growing Jewish Community in University Heights**

Vice Mayor Michele Weiss stated that this meeting is a roundtable discussion about some of the sensitivities and needs of the growing Jewish community in University Heights. Mrs. Weiss thanked Mr. Yisroel Goldstein and Rabbi Abrin, residents of University Heights, for attending. She added that this is a discussion to address the growth of the Jewish residents, and to determine if there is anything that the City has been unable to accommodate, which is really not the case. She added that this is to continue fostering goodwill that has always been part of University Heights' history. Mrs. Weiss noted that among the accommodations provided, the City has different swimming hours that can separate men and women, which most cities do not have across the country – even those with large Jewish communities. When there are events, Kosher food is usually included. This meeting is just to start the conversation to determine if there is something that is not met. Mrs. Weiss turned the floor over to Mr. Yisroel Goldstein and Rabbi Abrin. Mrs. Weiss invited everyone to ask questions and make comments.

Mr. Goldstein noted the following. The City as-a-whole has been very accommodating, and he echoed some of Mrs. Weiss' comments. Prior to Passover, the city's Service Department provides an extra pickup in the Orthodox Jewish areas. Also, the department on Saturday, the Sabbath, does pickups in the Jewish area first because they are aware that people are out and about. He thanked the City for that, adding that the City is a good one to live in. He wanted to make the point that just because there are some people not working well with the City, that not everyone be painted with the same paint brush. He referred to a petition that he signed, stated that he lived on Milton and is affected by what's going on over there because of the growth of the synagogues. He stated that he signed a petition because he believes the city and synagogues need to work together to figure things out.

Mr. Goldstein stated that he moved to University Heights almost 18 years ago, bought his house 14 years ago. He pointed out that at the time he purchased his home, he was concerned that many of the houses were too far away from the Jewish community and synagogues; now those areas are full because University Heights is a good place to live and close to synagogues. There have only been a few isolated anti-Semitic issues. As the community grows, the city and community have to figure out how services and synagogues can keep flourishing in the right direction as the community moves further out.

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Rabbi Abrin stated that he has lived in the city for five years. He moved from Jerusalem and finds University Heights to be a wonderful place not only for beautiful homes, but beautiful families; and that this city is vibrant and a great place to raise a family and he hopes to retire here.

Regarding building codes – there have been issues with the community infrastructure which need to be addressed. He explained that the community does not want to be in the news; want to be pleasant and blend in and we want to help build a community and to contribute factors to the pleasantness and community feel of the city. As far as general infrastructure, the goal is to make it seamless. Rabbi Abrin stated that he has always felt welcome and these discussions are very helpful and it is good to be proactive. We can grow without ruffling feathers; that has ways been the goal here. He thanked all for helping facilitate this conversation. He noted that there is a need to get ahead of infrastructure issues.

Mrs. Weiss referred to a community engagement series that took place about ten years ago stating that Council is interested in bringing that back. The series really brought the community together, and this is a first step in starting that again by discussing different religions and cultures. This program was conducted by a Cleveland State University professor. It was a popular program and brought the community together with a new understanding of different ethnicities and religions.

Regarding zoning, Mrs. Weiss noted that the Board of Zoning Appeals grants variances all the time and it doesn't matter what section of the city that you live in; BZA promotes growth in the housing expansion. Variances are often given for expanding homes. It was noted that large families are hard pressed to find large homes with enough bedrooms, so expansion is needed.

Councilman Justin Gould discussed services that the Orthodox Jewish community needs and asked about those needs for a walkable community. He asked for clarification of what is needed and reference was made to a virtual wall, a complex ritual for Orthodox Jews.

Rabbi Abrin explained that a synagogue is similar to a community center. He described that basic structure of Orthodox Jewish religion and stated that all are comfortable with other synagogues with stylistic differences, but everyone wants a place that is their own. Some are more tailored than others and have varying customs; some may have an older population and some may be more geared to families with young children. The synagogue is where many events take place; it is just a matter of getting there, he explained. Reference was made to wires and a virtual city which would enclose walkers and facilitate the journey to the synagogues. These wires (such as existing telephone lines) are not destructive and would hardly be noticed. Walking is what is done on Saturday, the Sabbath. Public transportation is not utilized unless there is an emergency. The population of Jewish community has more than doubled from 14 years ago.

Orthodox Jews can only walk on the Sabbath and the path has to be within walls – legal walls, not brick; a door frame; two telephone poles with a wire going across; just trying to enclose area with no gaps. Rabbi Abrin noted that this is a very complex issue.

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Shul is the Yiddish term for the word “synagogue”. It is not just a place for praying; it is where the family goes for bat mitzvahs, weddings, etc. The Rabbi prefers people come to the synagogue; a house of gathering is the Synagogue. In the orthodox community it is referred to as Shul.

Continued discussion revealed that there are different sects of Judaism. It was noted that rituals are different with less Orthodox; liturgy is different. The basic structure of an Orthodox Synagogue is the same wherever you go. Everybody wants a place more tailored to a specific tradition. People come from all over – Poland, Germany, Israel, etc. While they are all “Orthodox” there can be different customs. It is not realistic to build just one synagogue to encompass all sects. Relationships with parent/grandparents are very important.

There was a discussion regarding definitions of terms and various rituals. It was mentioned that there need to be 50 families to have a synagogue and there is a requirement that there must be 10 men to have a proper service.

A resident in the audience asked how many synagogues are needed and noted that houses on Green Road were razed in order to build another synagogue. The response was that within the community, there are different nuances within the religion and that is why there is a need for additional synagogues to accommodate those distinctions. It was noted that the Orthodox Jewish community has more than doubled in the last 14 years.

The size of the synagogues and the number of seats that will be provided were discussed with reference to one currently being built. It was pointed out that while only a certain number of seats (250) will be provided, the structure will also contain ceremonial facilities, a library, a girl’s school, etc. It was mentioned that there are about 2,000 Orthodox Jews being served in this area. Expansion has been great and adding just a few structures is not sufficient to serve all the needs because the existing structures were built years ago to serve the population at that time. All synagogues are full.

When asked about the anticipated growth in terms of numbers, it was mentioned that the exact number is unknown and that other communities are also growing and that it is difficult to forecast exact numbers.

A resident in the audience mentioned that she has lived in the City of University Heights all of her life and that many synagogues have moved because there weren’t enough members. She asked where since there is no land here, would the synagogues be built.

Rabbi Abrin suggested that they will work with the city and that they don’t want to be disruptive, but do have the right to pray. Growth has to be done in a normal way, hoping to be reasonable; not everyone is behind each detail.

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Regarding the suggestion that University Square be utilized, it was pointed out that is too far to walk on a regular basis at this time. It was noted that John Carroll University handicaps what can be done/developed since it takes up a lot of space. So, synagogues are on main streets and as the community expands there is hope to see continued growth.

It was pointed out that preference for synagogues would be Green Road or where there is land. Discussion continued regarding expansion and the possible impact on John Carroll University and GESU. Rabbi Abrin commented that he has been told that in the last 5-10 years, the Orthodox community has expanded in all directions. One of the issues is walkability to the temple and the question becomes walkability or close proximity to church or school. Currently, going toward Warrensville Center Road, there is a need for a synagogue. It was suggested that if there was a family going to GESU and an orthodox family moves in, there is a potential impact to GESU and JCU because enrollment may decline.

Natural growth will impact communities and demographics shift when people move out. Rabbi Abrin stated that there is no intention to disrupt, but at the same time it is an open real estate market. He stated that if there is a desirable community, both Jews and Jesuits will want to live there/here in University Heights.

Discussion continued regarding expansion and the possible impact on JCU and GESU. Rabbi Abrin commented that he has been told that in the last 5-10 years, the Orthodox community has expanded in all directions.

A resident commented that people know already where they want to move to be in proximity to a place of worship. Claver homes would be closer to a Shul. It was pointed out that no one is trying to control market – that there is an organic process of building communities.

Tax implications were discussed and how this would affect same. There were five houses on Green Road that were razed. Vice Mayor Weiss stated that the amount of property tax that the city gets is only about 10-12%. The majority of the taxes collected goes to the schools, library; the city makes its revenue on RITA taxes. Police and fire get a portion from property tax; the schools get about 65%; payroll taxes are also received from new construction.

Mr. Gould discussed how perceptions can change. Rabbi Abrin stated that every community changes over time, noting that at one time, there was a strong Orthodox community on the west side of Cleveland, but now most of the Orthodox Jewish communities are in the suburbs. In 30 years from now, the community will look different. As long as there is an institution, as JCU, the more the community is inviting like-minded people, the more the community will change. Change is difficult.

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Mrs. Blankfeld commented that people move for various reasons. She mentioned that her in-laws grew up in Cleveland around East 105, a predominantly Jewish neighborhood. Regarding GESU, in the 1930's services were held in City Hall. It started organically and people were drawn; JCU came from Cleveland – the St. Ignatius area. Neighborhoods come together organically and grow. People move to the Heights for diversity, and this makes us richer. It was pointed out that there is much more commonality in this area, not only are Jewish and Catholic residents in the City, but many different races, religions.

A resident in the audience expressed concern about hearing that 63 families are moving to the city from New York or New Jersey, and that this is not a normal growing pattern in the city. She stated that she has been in University Heights since 1970 and nobody cared; it is an integrated city and we have always been proud of that.

Mrs. Weiss mentioned that she is an east sider; her parents grew up in Cleveland Heights and University Heights. She stated that Jesuit and Jewish communities have many things in common. Cleveland, in general, is a wonderful community to live in for its diversity. She added that GESU and John Carroll University are foundations of University Heights and it is important that we continue to work together

There was some discussion about vouchers and Gearity School. Concern about the prices of real estate was expressed by realtors in the audience.

Mr. Cicero stated that things change organically. There is no infrastructure west of Warrensville Center Road. There is no grocery store. The Jewish Orthodox community is unique; they have to walk to synagogue. The concern is about overall infrastructure – a master plan.

Mrs. Weiss stated that this Council will be redoing the zoning code within the next 18 months and invited realtors as stakeholders to contribute to the process. She stated that the hope is to bring back the series of discoveries and encouraged all to revisit this important discussion.

Submitted by,

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Assistant Clerk of Council

Michele Weiss  
Vice Mayor