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# Neighbors launch challenge to charter school

JENNA PIZZI  
THE NEWS JOURNAL

Residents of Wilmington's Midtown Brandywine neighborhood have hired an attorney and are prepared to go to court to stop a new charter school from opening this fall.

Residents contend that their concerns about the placement of Freire Charter School in their neighborhood were never taken into consideration. The neighbors claim the school is required to apply for a variance to obtain the building permit because they do not have the required number of parking spaces, which would require the city to hold a public hearing. The school will occupy the former Blue Cross building on West 14th Street.

"It [court hearing] would give the neighbors and the neighborhood itself a really good forum to bring to light the issues," said Ben Cohen, president of the neighborhood association. Cohen said residents are concerned about the influx of traffic that the school would have on the small neighborhood and its narrow, tree-lined streets.

In a letter sent Monday to the city's Department of Licenses and Inspections, the neighborhood association's attorney, Rich Abbott, argues that the

building does not have the required number of parking spaces under city zoning code for the total number of students and staff that the school is projected to have when it reaches total expansion in three years.

Scott Johnson, a managing member of Fourteenth Street LLC, the company that owns the building, said the school has 41 parking spaces available now, more than the 35 required for this year, and when enrollment grows to the full 560 students in 2017-18 school year, the lease on 26 spots beneath an adjacent building will be up and those spots will be utilized by the school, giving it the required 67 parking spaces.

Johnson said the entire project has been closely scrutinized by city officials who have determined that it meets all requirements. He believes if taken to court, the project will be allowed to proceed.

Kelly Davenport, chief executive officer of Freire Charter Schools, declined to comment directly about the neighbors' concerns, saying the lease agreement the school signed requires the building owner to obtain the building permit.

City Solicitor Michael Migliore said he, too, believes Johnson and the Freire Charter School are not required to have

a variance for parking.

Although the legal argument centers on the parking issue, Cohen said, more than anything, neighbors want a chance to have their voices heard.

"We have been trying to get the city to listen for some time," Cohen said.

Cohen said not all of his neighbors are opposed to the school moving in, but there are a good majority who are concerned.

"It is going to impact our lives every day, and we don't know what is going to happen down the road," he said.

Lyn Doto, one of those concerned neighbors, said the community has also made a request to the state Department of Education seeking additional review of the school's approval.

"I have just taken this to heart because I can see the school from my house," Doto said. "It just worries me for the traffic here. It really does come down to that."

Cohen said if the association does not hear a response from the city regarding the letter, the association's board will vote on if it will file for an injunction in Chancery Court.

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## School is disruptive to neighborhood

As a resident of Midtown Brandywine, I am keenly aware of how blessed my family is to have moved to this neighborhood almost eight years ago. In preparing my child for kindergarten this fall, I have spent much time and effort figuring out what and where is the right school choice for our family. Investing in education and choice for families in Wilmington is imperative! What keeps getting lost in this debate is that there is no one opposed to creating a wonderful, positive high school in Wilmington, but it is the lack of wisdom and foresight to put a large school into a small neighborhood particularly without making appropriate plans for parking, drop-off, busing, etc. If Freire Wilmington is all about providing an education that focuses on "individual freedom, critical thinking and problem solving in an environment that emphasizes the values of community, teamwork and non-violence," then they should consider these same rights for the community they are setting stakes in. Why is the city so willing to ignore or bypass the rules that the rest of us have to live by and why is there so little response from city officials on behalf of its own residents?

Amie Baker  
Wilmington

6-5-15

## OUR READERS' VIEWS

2-7-15

### Charter school should pick a new spot

"Freire charter will benefit neighborhood." I respectfully disagree. I live right the down the street from the site of the Freire charter school in a city of Wilmington neighborhood that has developed a culture and understanding of who we are. I am a father of a 5-year-old who is enrolled in a city charter school. He is going to a charter school because my wife and I believe in the school concept and the location of the school in the city. We are vested in city living and believe in the charter schools. Do I believe that any school situated at the Freire site in our neighborhood will benefit the neighborhood and my son? Absolutely not. The known and unknown consequences of significantly increasing the neighborhood population will be detrimental to the children and neighbors who have lived here before Freire ever even considered selecting a location for a school that could harm the very same future the school is trying to protect.

Let Freire select a location that suits its needs without reducing the quality of life for my son, his friends and my neighbors who have already invested in our community to make it better for us all.

Robert Hronsky  
Wilmington

## OUR READERS' VIEWS

6-8-15

### School has more than parking woes

As a resident of Midtown Brandywine, I was first concerned about the Freire Charter School dropping more than 500 students into a neighborhood of 200 residents, a neighborhood with narrow sidewalks, one way streets and limited parking. However, my current concerns are much broader, including questions about the school's adherence to its charter and about the safety and well being of students attending it as well as the school's shirking legal requirements of both the city and the state. I am not alone.

The latest Department of Education public meeting had a court reporter taking down comments for the public record. I can only wish the author of a previous letter to the editor, a mother planning to send her children to this new charter school, the best of luck. However, she should be aware that there are far deeper questions about the capability of the school's model than just parking and traffic. The school simply needs time to refine their plans rather than opening with almost a \$3 million debt looming.

Judith Jones  
Wilmington