

Preserving the Courtyard

At the Arsenal Apartments
(465 Arsenal St., Watertown, MA)

A Presentation and Argument:

For Preserving the Courtyard (as it exists presently)

And

Against its Destruction (by being replaced by a Parking Lot)

[September, 2011]

Written by Jim Loughlin [representing his views and those of a large number of residents who have asked him to be their spokesperson on this issue.]

Historical Background: Arsenal Apartments' Buildings and Parking:

The Apartment Complex consists of four brick buildings designated as A, B, C, and D buildings. The "D building, erected in 1982, is the largest at 7 stories and is located alongside Arsenal Street, with some apartments facing out to the street and some to a rear parking lot and to one side each of the other three buildings. The B, C, and D buildings were once part of the old U. S. Government Arsenal and date back to 1820. These three buildings are two stories each, formed in a "detached" U and within that U is a lovely courtyard with three large oak trees and 15 smaller, mature, trees, with a large gazebo within its center.

Parking for the Arsenal Apartments consists of a gated side parking lot of 19 spaces (adjacent to the Harvard Vanguard parking lot), the parking area behind the main building (13 spaces, seven of them reserved for visitors) and a parking area just on the edge of buildings A and C (at the open sides of the "U") with 16 spaces. [Across from this parking area is a parking area of ten open spaces for the owner/tenants of the nearby townhouses/condos.]

The Arsenal Apartments are owned and managed by the Gilbane Development Company (GDC) whose primary headquarters is in Providence, Rhode Island.

Historical Background: Arsenal Apartments – its Mission:

The Arsenal Apartments provide housing (one and two bedroom apartments) for both seniors and those with disabilities (of any age). It is a HUD-assisted housing unit with rights and responsibilities both for the management and for the residents. HUD recognizes the "Residents' right to organize and participate in the decisions regarding the well-being of the project and their home."

There are 156 units with approximately 220 people. From my observation, the people come from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds where, for many, their native tongue is, their primary, perhaps only, language.

Because we are all seniors or people with disabilities, or have language concerns, we are a very vulnerable population with respect to opposing management decisions made at the Arsenal Apts. – a point I can't emphasize enough.

n.b. There may be slight errors in the details ("numbers") above as I have tried to learn about them solely from attendance at meetings (taking notes) and my own observations.

The Arsenal Apartments' Courtyard Issue (Nov, 2010):

That the Courtyard will be destroyed to make way for a 39 space parking lot.

Residents first learned officially about the above proposed happening at meetings held by management during the week of November 15-19, 2010. I attended the first of those meetings, a Monday, and when I learned about what was to happen to the courtyard I spoke out against it at that meeting [reasons will be given later in this paper] and mentioned I would try to prevent it from happening, though how to do it, at that time, I had no idea. Some people spoke to me later and said to me that "I spoke for them too." When I learned that a spokesman from Gilbane Development Company (GDC) would be present the next day, I returned on Tuesday and spoke out again against the parking lot expansion. Many people, both during the meeting and, in particular, after it, spoke to me, asking for my help in preserving our courtyard. Two days later, I met with some of those people who brought me, that evening, to a "Trees for Watertown" meeting where they (through an interpreter) and I spoke about the issue. The members/officers of "Trees" was very supportive of our position and, through the ensuing months, have offered to me (us) extremely helpful advice and guidance, especially with the importance of becoming involved with Town of Watertown government (Town Council, Planning Board, Conservation Board, Zoning Board, Tree Warden's office) which I have done, through attendance at meetings, visits to offices, talking to officials, emails, letters, and telephone calls.

The Arsenal Courtyard: an Appreciation

For all of the residents of the Arsenal Apartments, the courtyard can be a place of openness, quiet, beauty, rest and relaxation, for themselves, friends, and visitors. It is available to all of us, whether elderly, disabled, blind.... It was initially designed as a great benefit for the people living there then and for those people who would live there in the future. The three large oak trees and the fifteen flowering fruit trees, the grasses, the various plantings of shrubs and bushes, both within the Courtyard and along the sides of the buildings, all add to its allure and attractiveness – its natural beauty. And, again, it's open and it's meant for all the residents! The gazebo has provided a great meeting place for many residents, especially during the summer evening hours. And that gazebo is at the center of it all -in the midst of this lovely courtyard, as it too was designed to be.

Let's look closer at the trees within this courtyard. What do they provide? What is a tree worth? In a recent article *The Wilson Quarterly* (Winter, 2011), the writer Jill Jonnes asked that very question: "What is a Tree Worth?" As I read the article I noted many thoughts about trees and their particular benefits which are directly applicable to our living here at the Arsenal Apartments. What Jonnes found from various disciplines of science is that trees:

- Are vital to a community's well-being
- Sweeten the air
- Clean the air
- Reduce human stress
- Improve public health
- Beautify
- Provide shade
- Act as a habitat for birds (my own addition)

I quote from one of his conclusions: "Trees can play a role in cooling cities while making them more beautiful, healthier, and friendlier to humans." Trees can do the same for all the residents here at the Arsenal, particularly those who live in buildings A, B, and C. [Please note that this writer is not a resident of those three buildings, but resides in building D.]

The courtyard is a continuing benefit for all the residents. It must be preserved!

The Parking Lot Proposal:

A bad idea which has many important serious and damaging disadvantages.

At the November meetings when residents first heard about the parking lot, it was not announced so much as a proposal but as a statement. It was a “done deal.” A few days later an official notice, dated Nov. 23, 2010, from management announced that “Parking Project: Early spring next year we will be turning the courtyard into a parking lot. The gazebo will be moved next to C building. New trees will be replanted to replace the ones that are removed.” The reasons given by management at the Monday and Tuesday meetings I attended were given as follows:

- There is a need for more parking for some people living here now;
- There is a need for more parking for people who want to live here but will not come if they would have to be on a waiting list for parking.
- That the Courtyard is under-utilized
- That residents can use the Arsenal park nearby if they wish to be in a park

Those of us who are for the preservation of the Courtyard and against its replacement by a parking lot do understand the needs of those tenants who have been waiting, in some cases a long time, to have a parking place. It is frustrating! But, probably, from the earliest days of the Arsenal Apartments’ existence, we have all been on waiting lists for parking. Some of us (including me) have been very fortunate as we had parking at the Harvard Vanguard lot next door while we were on the waiting list. But to destroy the courtyard to make a 39 space parking lot is not the answer as it dismisses the reality that this lovely courtyard is for all of the residents with cars or without. There are many people living here who do not have cars, probably will not in the future have cars, or have given up driving. I will address this issue again near the end of this paper.

For those unwilling to move into the Arsenal Apartments if they don’t have parking is something I acknowledge as only a consideration, amongst many considerations, of anybody moving anywhere. The Courtyard is for the people living here now and for the future. It should not be traded for the possibility/probability of some people not wanting to live here.

I dismiss the argument that the courtyard is sometimes under-utilized. All parks, whether local, state, or national) are sometimes under-utilized. Certainly, they are not under-utilized by anyone residing in buildings A, B, or C who look out their windows to enjoy the view and (in season) fresh air. I have often walked through the Arsenal Park where I might be the only one there (not during the summer!) but it would be tragic if someone decided, for that reason, it should be used, for a more “practical reason,” such as a parking lot.

Some damaging effects for the residents of having this parking lot:

- 1) A lot of noise! We would have 39 cars within the environs of buildings A, B, and C. In other words, we fill up the “U.” Although, at present, there is a 16 space parking area at the opening of this “U” it is only the front (hood) part of the car that intrudes into this open “U.” Noise, I’ve told is minimal. So, the situation would be dramatically changed with the additional noise of 39 cars – 24/7.
- 2) A lot of car exhaust/fumes. Again, this would be taking place all within the confines of buildings A, B, and C and, in no way can this be interpreted as beneficial to the residents of buildings A, B or C., or D, for that matter. For the housing of elderly and disabled residents, this is a public health issue (as noise really is) and would be very detrimental to the residents. It should be noted that the fumes from the cars parking in the present 16 spaces go out away from the opening of the “U,” not toward the buildings and the courtyard. It should also be noted that the residents of all the buildings are not allowed to have “in-window” air-conditioners. [This privilege was taken away a few years ago.] So, during the warmer times, are those residents to close their windows to avoid the car fumes? They need their windows open. We all need as much fresh air as possible.
- 3) Congestion. In our opinion, it will be enormous. During spring, summer, and fall it will be a very crowded scene. During the winter, with the snow, it’s a bit of a problem now with shoveling and removing 16 cars. What will be the condition for 39 cars within a much more closely confined space.
- 4) Safety. For anybody who is elderly, disabled, blind, etc. this parking lot would be an obstacle to go around or go through. It is not so at present. There are sidewalks within the courtyard and on the four sides of it. The present 16 space parking presents no hazards to any resident.

The Need for Additional Parking - an Overview:

That some residents have been on a waiting list for a parking space is readily acknowledged by us. From the various meetings over the years (I, myself, have resided here since 2002) I have appreciated the efforts that GDC's management has made in trying to find parking spaces in the parking lots nearby, in particular, at the Arsenal Mall and Harvard Vanguard sites. Recently, residents and visitors were allowed to park at Harvard Vanguard in that area facing Arsenal Street, but were not allowed to park there during the night. [As of this writing, I am unsure what the latest state of affairs permits.]

Over the years the situation has changed from time to time - sometimes day-time parking elsewhere, sometimes not; sometimes night-time parking, sometimes not. But destroying the courtyard to provide additional parking on the grounds of the Arsenal Apartments is not the solution to the difficulties of finding off-site parking.

What can be done? Let me offer a few thoughts:

- 1) I think there must be a continuing effort to work with the owners/management of Arsenal Mall and Harvard Vanguard (and, possibly, other places) There is so much empty parking space at those sites that could be made available to meet the needs of residents here on a waiting list for parking. At night, it is an enormous empty space! The management of the Arsenal Apartments must keep moving toward "continuous involvement" with the owner(s) of these lots. If the reply is negative one year, it could be positive the next. Managements change, and decisions made by them one time may change at another time. But replacing the Courtyard with a parking lot will be a final change – there will be no going back – and the Courtyard will be lost forever.
- 2) Think "outside the box." I would encourage the management (GDC) to get involved with city officials of the Town of Watertown to see if they could advise and help, through their offices, to find some parking elsewhere off-site. This, again, would be an on-going process, not a "once-only" type of thing.
- 3) I would offer the same encouragement to get the State Representative and State Senator for our districts involved in this issue.
- 4) While the above efforts are being done, on a continuous basis, I think that the present system of having people on a waiting list for a parking space is the fairest one possible. When a space opens up, the next person on the list gets it. As stated before, we've all been there and done that.
- 5) Let it not be forgotten that we have the MBTA # 70 bus directly outside the main building and across the street and, of course, special-needs vehicles available for residents from the MBTA and other social agencies and our own bus, thanks to management, primarily used for grocery shopping.

In conclusion, our purpose in writing this statement is to give our reasons for preserving the Courtyard here at the Arsenal Apartments, for the residents now and for the residents in the future. Thank you.

I am, Jim Loughlin (#414) speaking for many, many residents here at the Arsenal Apts.