Battle over new PHA housing near old burial ground

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Abstract: The controversial Philadelphia Housing Authority plan to build 55 townhouses on the historic African-American burial ground is expected to stir up emotions at a community meeting Thursday night in Germantown.

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Full text: Oct. 04--Barry Le Land knows a man who talks of bravely kicking a skull around when he was a boy after the Queen Lane Apartments were built in 1955.

"A couple of fellows said they were playing kickball and thought they were kicking a rock, but then, they saw it was a skull," Le Land said Wednesday.

"I have seen bones over there. But we didn't know it was a Potter's Field."

The controversial Philadelphia Housing Authority plan to build 55 townhouses on the historic African-American burial ground is expected to stir up emotions at a community meeting Thursday night in Germantown.

The Northwest Neighbors of Germantown will meet at 6:30 p.m. at the Queen Lane Train Station, at Queen Lane and Schulyer Street.

"We do not want PHA to continue to desecrate those grounds," said Lisa Hopkins, president of the group. "If somebody's great-grandmother was buried there, they wouldn't want a building put on her back."

Le Land said he saw bones in the area when he was an 11-year-old paperboy throwing a ball around with other boys while waiting for copies of The Bulletin to be delivered to a shack at Queen Lane and Pulaski Avenue.

Residents said the bones were unearthed when PHA built the high-rise.

The Germantown Potter's Field was created in 1755. Burials continued until 1915. It is a historical site, said Walter Gallas, of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Now, PHA plans to demolish the 16-story, 119-unit building at Queen Lane and Pulaski Avenue, vacant now for nearly a year, and replace it with 55 townhouses.

The last 111 tenants were relocated last November, the day before Thanksgiving.

Michael Johns, PHA's acting deputy director for operations, said PHA has every intention of honoring the burial ground.

"We made the immediate determination to honor the ancestors ... and not build anything over the existing Potter's Field," Johns said Wednesday.

If a federally required historical review allows the project to go forward, Johns said PHA plans to build the townhouses along the perimeter of the burial ground.

He said an open space and memorial will be left to acknowledge the burial ground.

But Hopkins and members of other civic groups said they believe PHA has underestimated the size of the burial ground. They think it is bigger than the area PHA promises to leave free.

And some residents urged PHA not to build any low-income rental housing at the site. They want PHA to provide low-income housing for people who can buy the homes.

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