

WITNESS STATEMENT OF REV. JOHN LAWSON

Statement re: Sacred Lands

I'm writing this statement in regards to both the sacred lands in general and the development at the corner of Woodlawn Road and Woolwich Street beside the Ignatius Jesuit Center and the Woodlawn and Marymount Cemeteries in particular.

I am a United Church minister serving Dublin Street United Church in the downtown area of Guelph. I have been in this position for the last 3 1/2 years.

My first experience of Guelph happened 22 years ago at the Ignatius Center when I was a new graduate from seminary. I came for an eight-day silent retreat that I can say without doubt this retreat changed my life and has shaped my vocation ever since. I was a Protestant encountering a Catholic tradition but was welcomed into an institution that was broadly ecumenical. The mixture of faithful spiritual guidance and teaching, coupled with time apart and quiet reflection walking the 600 acres of the Ignatius property, all came together to make the experience the wonderful and transformative one it was.

It was with special pleasure, therefore, that I reconnected in with the Jesuit Center when I arrived in Guelph 3 1/2 years ago. I have used the property and the Center as a spiritual retreat on a regular basis, for weekend retreats and for spiritual days apart. Whether the stay is short or long the grounds themselves are an integral part of my experience and spiritual renewal. To my mind the property is a jewel and a treasure at the north end of the city. And it is not just

retreatants who benefit from this wonderful space. I have experienced an open welcome to all as people of all sorts enjoy the property for recreation, work a garden plot, walk the labyrinth or simply have time apart in nature. Our Healing Team at Dublin Street United had their picnic on the grounds because they too treasure its sacred nature. It truly is a place where people from all over the world as well as local people come for spiritual renewal and restoration.

It was with some alarm and no little dismay that I learned of a large commercial development slated for lands abutting both the Ignatian lands and the Cemeteries. I have walked the southern sections of the property often enjoying the cedar bush as well as the grassy wetland that I believe will abut the proposed commercial development. I have used these trails at all seasons and cannot imagine how I would have the same pleasure and spiritual contemplation in that whole southern section of the property with the lights, noise and view of a big box retail store that I believe is planned for the property.

I was made aware that some mitigation efforts will be made to buffer the Ignatian lands from the commercial development but it is hard to imagine how any of these could effectively block the light or noise or view in the southern part of the property. From what I am led to understand this is a big development . . . one that is not easily hidden.

Now all this might seem like so much whining and desire to quash all development. But my concern is more broadly based. I was surprised and distressed to discover that the whole idea of sacred lands had no place in planning decisions as far as developments nearby were concerned. I think this is serious oversight that needs to be addressed and acknowledged.

It is curious, for example, that the Church of our Lady, which is such a landmark in the City of Guelph, has its sight lines protected for its aesthetic qualities but no thought is given to the sacred nature of the church itself in planning issues.

When I lived in British Columbia there were active discussions between first Nations people, the government and the forestry industry concerning the protection of sacred lands from logging. From what I understand, sacred lands and sites are now part of the discussion in shaping forestry practices and where cutting takes place. From my understanding discussions of a similar nature simply are not admissible in planning decisions within cities or in development issues? But why? At one time Parks of any kind were not part of city planning, but now we have come to realize the importance of having spaces for recreation, exercise and play. When are we going to recognize the needs for similar spaces for spiritual re-creation?

As a minister I find myself frequently conducting burial services in Woodlawn Cemetery. It is already difficult, in some parts of the cemetery, to make myself heard because of the roar of traffic as I gather with a family to lay to rest a beloved member of their family. The prospect of even greater noise and traffic is not something I look forward to. But of course, I will do my job. I might not like it but I will still offer the services that I can in the best way that I can in that cemetery. I do that because I have to.

But going on a retreat and looking for a place of quiet and restoration is something that I have a choice in. It is something that I look for in choosing where I go on retreat.

For some years I went on retreat at the Anglican Convent of the Sisters of St. John the Divine near Yonge Street and the 401 in Toronto. They offered wonderful hospitality and spiritual direction. But I would never choose to go there except in the wintertime when I knew the windows would be closed to keep out the roar of traffic. From what I understand now, the sisters have moved, and the busyness and the noise associated with their old property was part of that decision.

My point is clear. Sacred spaces have many factors that come together to make them the special and healing place they are. What is around them does make a difference.

Does that mean that spiritual spaces should have veto over all development? Of course not. But it seems to me vital that they be a voice at the table in decisions that will affect them greatly.

I would urge that the voice of those who hold the Ignatian Lands and the Cemeteries sacred be heard and that citizens in Guelph and citizens of Canada have a way of protecting their spiritual heritage along with those other vital interests of commerce, employment, recreation and quality of life. We ask for a place at the table where we can express our religious convictions that is recognized in Canada as a basic right.

Thank you for your consideration.

(Rev.) John Lawson