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Calvert School ready to evict the kind of residents the mayor would surely want to stay in the city.;
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BODY:

Of all the preservation controversies that have erupted in Baltimore this year, none is more complicated or wrenching than the plan by Calvert School to buy and demolish 91 apartments at 4300 N. Charles St. to create a middle school and two playing fields.

Calvert's plan doesn't threaten just one historic building. It doesn't affect just one street. The significance of the buildings in question cannot be measured solely by their age or architectural design.

In this case, what is at stake is an urban ecosystem that has evolved over the past 35 years. It is made up of buildings from the 1910s, buildings from the 1960s, and a grove of oak trees that provides a parklike setting for the entire area. It also involves more than 130 people who have chosen to live in the city -- many of whom may flee to the county if they are forced to move. Representatives can be seen out on Tuscany Road in front of Calvert School on weekday mornings -- some assisted by wheelchairs or canes -- waving picket signs to inform passers-by of their plight.

Such a community does not fit the standard definition of "endangered landmark." And yet it is precisely the hard-to-define nature of the property -- the combination of old and new buildings, nestled in a mature, wooded landscape -- that has made it a sylvan paradise for those who live there. It also provides the starting point for a community debate that promises to broaden the definition of what is preservation-worthy in architecture and landscape design.

While Calvert School may be within its legal rights to let the wrecking ball fly, it would not necessarily be in the best interests of the surrounding neighborhoods, or the city at large, if it did so. Forty-three hundred N. Charles is exactly the sort of diverse, stable community that Baltimore needs to stay economically healthy. Its residents -- including more than a few "empty nesters" who moved from larger homes in the suburbs -- are the very people Mayor Martin O'Malley has been trying to entice to live within the city limits. Baltimore has lost more than 200,000 residents since 1960. It can't afford to lose any more.

Calvert School, which pays no taxes, has not yet acquired the apartment parcel and can still back out of the sale. For the good of the community, it should find another location for its playing fields, one that does not require the

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displacement of any city residents.

A walk around the site

Part of what makes this controversy less than clear cut, on the surface at least, is that the buildings at 4300 N. Charles St. would not normally be considered worth preserving. People who drive by on Charles Street and glance through the entrance piers may be forgiven for wondering what all the fuss is about. To appreciate the area's beauty, one must walk around the property.

The facts are as follows: Calvert School, at 105 Tuscany Road, has 360 students in grades K to 6 plus a home instruction division, and wants to add grades 7 and 8. It also wants to add two large playing fields. Directors made the decision to add a middle school before they identified a site on which to build it. But after they did so, Eugene O'Dunne, owner of the Charles Street apartments, informed school representatives that he wanted to sell his property, and the school negotiated a contract to buy his 6.5-acre parcel. It already has purchased an adjacent 1.5-acre property with one home on it. School leaders notified apartment residents of their expansion plans in mid-September. They hope to move ahead with the acquisition in time to begin demolishing the apartments during the latter half of next year.

The apartment community includes 11 three- and four-story buildings constructed in 1965 by O'Dunne's father, who still lives on the premises. The buildings are relatively nondescript, with brick walls and pitched roofs. A big selling point is that the apartments are bigger than most in the city -- up to three bedrooms. Many have patios or balconies that extend the amount of living space.

The buildings are not historically or architecturally significant. In fact, oldtimers note that they sparked controversy when they went up because they displaced woodlands and at least one mansion. The surrounding area was and still is a veritable museum of homes for affluent Baltimoreans. Six of them were designed by Lawrence Hall Fowler, one of the best local architects of the early 1900s. Compared with the sensitively designed houses by Fowler and others -- which should be designated a historic district -- the apartments were an alien presence.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the rental office. Fowler was known for designing his buildings and landscapes so each residence blends in with its natural surroundings. The O'Dunnes continued that tradition when they built 4300 Charles St. Over the years, the trees have grown back in a way that softens the brick apartments and creates tree-lined vistas one rarely finds in the city. Wildlife has come back too, including red foxes that run through the property. This idyllic enclave is the feature many residents treasure most -- and one that can't be easily replicated or matched by another development down the street.

In addition, the apartments have been well maintained, their location is convenient to city attractions and job centers, and prices have not risen as much as they have at many other rental communities. They're also remarkably quiet, considering their proximity to Charles Street. As a result, they have developed a strong following among Baltimoreans looking for attractive, affordable rental housing. Some residents have lived there for more than 25 years. When apartments turn over, they rarely stay vacant for long.

The setting is further enhanced by the presence of two Fowler houses that date from 1916. One was designed for Fowler's three female cousins and has been converted to five apartments. The other has been a private residence. Calvert bought the residence earlier this year and would acquire the cousins' house as part of the 4300 parcel.

School representatives say the Fowler buildings are not threatened. Preliminary plans by Cochran, Stephenson and Donkervoet, Calvert's architect, indicate that only the apartment buildings would come down. The primary green space, called Oak Place Grove and Passage, and the Fowler houses would be spared as the nucleus of a new middle school campus. The Fowler houses would be adapted to contain elements of the middle school, and another building would be added between them and Charles Street. The new structures would help Calvert School free up space in its existing building -- also designed by Fowler and later expanded -- and reduce class sizes in the lower school.

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Part of the apartment community's road system, meanwhile, would be used to create a separate entrance to the middle school from Charles Street. Parents would still drop off lower school students along Tuscany Road, as they do now. The rest of the apartment buildings would be razed to make way for playing fields. It could work quite nicely --if it didn't cause so much disruption to the community at 4300.

Endangered species

The heart of the issue, as with most preservation controversies, boils down to a few basic questions: Would the replacement project be better than what is there now? Does creation of a middle school and additional playing fields for Calvert students justify the destruction of 91 apartments? Should land that currently generates \$375,000 in annual real estate taxes be taken off the city tax rolls? If so, the project deserves to move ahead. If not, it doesn't.

Alfred W. Barry III, a planning consultant hired by Calvert's board, makes a strong case for the school. He says it has been in existence for 103 years and part of the Tuscany-Canterbury area since 1924 -- long before the apartments were built. From an urban design standpoint, he says, the apartments are "not related to anything." He argues that North Baltimore is known for its strong educational institutions and that they in turn help keep North Baltimore neighborhoods strong. If Calvert School is unable to expand, he warns, it likely would move to Baltimore County. Then the fate of both the Charles Street apartments and Calvert's Tuscany Road property would be in doubt.

Barry said he believes that if the 4300 property were available for development today and the two choices were Calvert's expansion and O'Dunne's apartments, the Calvert plan would be preferable. In many ways, he says, the school would be taking the land back closer to the density of use it had before the apartments were built. "I have a hard time thinking," he said, "that with less traffic and more open space, Calvert's proposal in general wouldn't be more favorably received."

Unfortunately, that's not the choice, and therein lies the problem. The land is not undeveloped. Two wrongs don't make a right.

The O'Dunne property was scarred once, and it has healed better than anyone had reason to expect. Upwards of 130 people have been living there, quite happily. If Calvert moves ahead, many of them will be chased out of the city. Baltimore simply cannot afford that. The residents should not be put through that.

At this point, the best solution would be for Calvert School to abandon its plans to buy the Charles Street apartments, construct its proposed middle school on land it already owns in Tuscany-Canterbury (possibly along with Fowler's cousins' house), and find a satellite location for the playing fields it wants.

School representatives say they have been unable to find suitable land in the immediate area for playing fields. But Loyola College in Maryland has been negotiating with the city to take over part of the Coldspring South tract along the Jones Falls Valley. Bryn Mawr School bought the old Mount Washington Club lacrosse field property. Perhaps Calvert could share part of the old Boumi Temple tract with Loyola, or land owned by the city. It may have to shuttle students back and forth, but that's how many other schools do it.

One Tuscany-Canterbury resident has suggested that if the apartment dwellers really want to hold up demolition, they should plant a snail darter or some other endangered species in the stream that runs through the oak grove, and then call in the environmentalists. That would stop Calvert for a while.

But in a sense, there already is an endangered species on the property. Given the number of people who have left the city in recent years, any hardy souls who can afford to live wherever they want and still choose to remain in the city, renewing their leases year after year, have to qualify as the rarest of the rare. Land grabs such as Calvert's threaten to bring them even closer to extinction.

Enriched by the natural beauty of the land and the gifted hand of Lawrence Hall Fowler, Eugene O'Dunne's

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secluded oasis has been one environment where die-hard urban dwellers can still thrive. No one -- least of all an educational institution -- should be too quick to plow it under.

GRAPHIC: Photo(s), Threatened: Apartment buildings, including this one, would, be demolished if school plans go through., Lloyd Fox : Sun Staff

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