

Tom Potash Criticism of the Destruction of Downtown Oakland

Tom Potash says:

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The article was very entertaining, it is a mix of facts, some strong opinions by the writer, and a little bit of fantasy to spice up the piece to make it interesting to read. I thought that accusations about the town leaders of the 1950's were cheap shots against people that are no longer here to defend themselves, and there was very little factual information to support the claims of impropriety.

The piece correctly points out that the town population grew fivefold during the 1950's. The mayor and council had tremendous challenges in building a community that would meet the needs of the citizens. I don't think that the most important item on their agenda was preserving 50 year old homes along Main Street. What happened in Oakland also happened in almost every community in New Jersey and the northeast United States - suburban sprawl. Now Oakland, along with many other New Jersey towns, has developed a downtown improvement plan that will hopefully reverse some of that over time.

The story about the mayor (Alexander Potash) and Ponds Church made me realize that Mr. Heffernan likes to play fast and loose with the facts. Such a meeting did take place in the winter of 1955 and a land swap was discussed. The swap had nothing to do with a strip mall as the writer states, but in fact the town was interested in the site for a new Borough Hall. Ponds was interested in building a new church for the expanding congregation, and the town had a piece of property that would have fit their needs. The church actually formed a committee and studied the proposal carefully. Ultimately, they turned down the offer and decided to build the new church on the current site. Mayor Potash's family was then, and is still now, very active in Ponds Church. He never would have been disrespected by the church the way Mr. Heffernan describes. In fact, Mr. Potash chaired a fund drive during the depression that raised over \$3,300 that helped keep the church afloat.

The story about Oakland Military Academy makes some pretty strong accusations of political corruption that are not at all supported by facts. If the governing body was so anxious to develop this property, why did it remain an empty field for 20 years until the Copper Tree Mall was developed in the mid 1970's? That story just doesn't add up, but it makes for a great read.

Could our former leaders have done more to create a better functioning and more attractive downtown? No doubt, but weigh this against all of the other issues they were facing. How would they have preserved the homes? A property owner has every right to demolish a structure. Is the writer suggesting that the town purchase the homes with taxpayer dollars, remove the property from the tax rolls, and then spend money to maintain them? We could have had 10 more Van Allen houses!