

Additional Information Re Boulevard Heights January 14 Town Hall Meeting

I am grateful to the parishioners who brought to me their concerns about the now-canceled town hall meeting formerly scheduled on January 14, 2024 by the Boulevard Heights Neighborhood Association (BHNA). Our parishioners' input made me aware of facts I did not know, and helped me consider what should be done. To one and all, thank you.

From my recent experience, I have learned that any event touching on politics needs careful scrutiny before it takes place at one of our campuses. I've put into place policies to help make sure that careful scrutiny takes place. I am also considering whether additional policies would help our parish be a place where people with varying political views feel welcome and at home.

In my pastor column for this weekend I described what happened. In summary, the decision I made was to ask the BHNA to address the problem caused by Freedom Principle MO's sponsorship of the event. When BHNA decided that Freedom Principle MO would no longer sponsor the event, and that BHNA would take over directly the sponsorship and management of the event, I decided to let the event proceed on the IHM campus. However, God's providence arranged for a forecast of inclement weather, and BHNA decided to cancel the meeting so that no one would need to travel in dangerous conditions. Should BHNA decide to schedule an event on one of our campuses at a later date, I will evaluate their request in accord with the new process, giving it careful scrutiny.

Nonetheless, I expect that some people will not be satisfied with my decisions, and I think they deserve an explanation for why I chose this path. As I made my decision, I tried to adhere to principles which I would also apply in other cases.

Some people may agree with Freedom Principle MO's stated purpose and the means they use to achieve it, and may disagree with my decision to ask BHNA to address Freedom Principle MO's sponsorship. To such people, I respond that the online discourse of Freedom Principle MO on X (Twitter) is regularly petty and mean-spirited. While I accept that different people hold different views about what should be done to address social and economic issues, I believe that respectful dialogue is vital to make progress on them. If I had known in the past, when I first became aware of Freedom Principle MO's participation, what I know now, I would not have let them sponsor an event on our campus. To give only one example of something that troubled me, Freedom Principle MO on December 4, 2023 cited an article calling Pope Francis a "Commie Pope" and said "We can now officially say that Pope Francis no longer represents the Catholic Church."

Some people have told me that they do not think we as a local parish should allow a town hall about political issues on our campus. I can see the attraction of such an approach. In some ways it would make life simpler. I checked with the Archdiocese of Saint Louis about whether a town hall like this was permissible. The Archdiocese did not take any position on whether such a town hall was wise, but did confirm that because of the way the town hall was planned—focused on issues, with different positions represented, inviting elected officials based on their current

status as elected officials, not their possible status as current or future candidates—it was permitted by Archdiocesan guidelines. After reflection, I did not think it was right for our parish to reject this town hall simply because it touched on political issues. I foresaw that in the future we as a parish might wish to host a town hall meeting about a political issue connected to Catholic teaching, perhaps welcome to immigrants, or the protection of human life in the womb.

Some people have told me that they objected to the specific political issues under consideration. I acknowledge that the political issues in question are controversial. That is, they concern matters about which people have different views, and about which people feel strongly. To the best of my knowledge, the political issues under consideration at the town hall are not political issues about which the Catholic Church or the Archdiocese of Saint Louis has taken a position. Similar to what I said in the last paragraph, I did not think I could commit our parish to a path where we hold town halls only on issues that were uncontroverted, or only on political issues about which the Catholic Church or the Archdiocese of Saint Louis had taken a position.

Some people told me that they objected to one of the legislators invited to speak at town hall, because the policies for which the legislator has advocated in the past go against our Catholic values, or because the legislator conducts politics in a way not in keeping with our values as a parish. Such concerns made sense to me. After reflection, I did not think that this was a sufficient reason to remove the event from our campus. I thought that in the future, we might well wish to welcome to our campus, for the sake of working together on some issue important to the common good, a political official whose public policy or rhetoric contradicts Catholic teaching or values. For example, I could imagine a situation in which our parish wants to work on the problem of human-trafficking, and invites to a town hall meeting about that topic a political official who supports wider legalization of abortion in Missouri.

Some people told me that the way this event was organized showed that under the guise of a town hall, the event was in fact intended to be a political rally. Some people did not think that it was reasonable to ask citizens to present questions to the moderator in advance of the meeting; this might let the organizers only select questions promoting certain political views. Other people questioned why the event featured political officials from outside of Saint Louis City, and only one political official representing Saint Louis City. Before the cancellation, I planned to attend the event. I wanted to see what would actually happen. Would it have been a respectful discussion reflecting a variety of viewpoints? That is what BHNA told me that they wanted. They told me that they invited political officials from outside of Saint Louis City because these officials sit on state committees that handle legislation affecting the City. Based on BHNA's past relationship with our parish, I had decided to trust that they were being honest about their intentions, and that they would choose appropriate means to reach their intentions.

Some people told me that our parish should not have the event on our campus because it was controversial, or a distraction from our mission as a parish. I feel the force of these objections; I would have been glad to spend on other tasks the time I have spent thinking about what to do regarding this meeting. On reflection, I thought it was likely that just as there are people who oppose the event on our campus, so also there would be people who would oppose removing

the event from our campus. So it did not seem that likely that removing the event from our campus would end the controversy surrounding the event. And it seemed to me that the best way I could return our focus to our mission as a parish would be to make the best decision I could about what to do, whatever that might be, and to explain that decision to the community. All this being said, as I consider whether similar events should occur in the future, I will consider whether the benefit of the event outweighs the time and attention that it might demand.

I want to note that this town hall was not hosted or sponsored by SSP parish; it was an event of the BHNA, using our space. I accept that we as a parish have the authority, and a responsibility, to decide how our space is used. The fact that BHNA hosted and sponsored the event would not have removed our responsibility to act in accord with our values. At the same time, our parish collaborates not only with BHNA, but also with many other organizations which use our space. For example, there are various nonprofits helping people in wonderful ways renting space at our SJB campus. Such collaboration has great benefits, and asks of our parish some trust of those organizations, and by extension, some trust of the people with whom they choose to collaborate. This was another reason why I had planned to take the risk of trusting BHNA.

As ever, your views and ideas are most welcome. Please pray for me, and for our parish. This experience has made me feel strongly my need for God's mercy in my work as a pastor, and also my need for the Holy Spirit's gifts of wisdom, counsel, and fortitude.