

Chapter 25: So, What's In A Name?

The letter to the editor was quick and to the point. The disgruntled citizen, perhaps an English teacher, or maybe someone with nothing better to do, was kind enough to point out, albeit in a very public way, how uninformed The Village was. After all, how could the city allow a shopping center to be built with a name that was spelled incorrectly? Building inspectors, zoning administrators, plan reviewers and other pillars (pun intended) of the community should be ashamed for allowing it to happen. Everyone knows "Colonnade" is spelled with only one "l" and not two. Thus went the letter in the community section of the Daily Oklahoman.

Sometimes you just have to laugh at things people get wound up over. Cities usually do not assume the roll of proofreader when it comes to the spelling of new developments. No one publicly chastises the legions of modern day parents for spelling their kid's name "Aimee", "Karyn" or "Kymberly" or whatever unconventional spelling tickles their fancy. Maybe the developer just happened to want the name of the Collonade to be spelled that way. One might even argue that the unusual spelling adds character and flair to what otherwise might be considered a blasé name. In any event, the story behind the Collonade is anything but blasé. Well, okay, perhaps the story is in fact rather boring, but the commercial development was indeed an important addition to The Village and thus is worthy of at least brief note.

When the old Twilight Gardens drive-in theatre finally closed its doors to the public in the 60's, the site where the Collonade would eventually be built stood silently vacant for several years. At that time, Britton Square Shopping Center did not exist and there were no car dealerships in the area yet either. All that one could find in close proximity to the site was a gas station at Britton and May and Village Bank which was located just to the north of the gas station. Just to the east, however, there were existing neighborhoods full of citizens who were not inclined to look favorably towards commercial development on their doorsteps.

One would certainly be naïve to expect any commercial development immediately abutting an established neighborhood to be welcomed with open arms. And as would be expected, the impending commercial development of the area did, in fact, engender considerable disaffection on the part of local inhabitants.

Especially distasteful to local residents was the plan to extend Abbey Road and Berkshire Way to May Avenue and thus expose the neighborhoods to traffic from May as well as from the proposed shopping center itself. Other concerns included potential drainage problems and privacy issues stemming from the two-story office building proposed for the Northeast corner of the shopping center. Residents also took exception to plans to widen Surry Place, which if allowed, would have provided improved access to the proposed shopping center via Britton Road.

Residents, upset with the development plans, petitioned the Council and appeared before the Council en force. Fortunately, the contingent was remarkably civil. Stuart Kirk, whose residence at 2717 Berkshire Way was precariously situated on the battlefield, acted as spokesperson for the delegation.

Among those accompanying Kirk to the meeting was Monty Murphy, a long time resident of The Village and high-ranking official at the Oklahoma Department of Transportation. Murphy had taken it upon himself to prepare an alternative site plan for the development of the area.

The Council examined the alternative plan and gave due consideration to all points of view on the matter, but after considerable wrangling and debate, the Council ended up split on the issue.

Councilman Roy Carmack, who represented the area and also lived nearby, joined forces with Tom Graham in opposition to the shopping center. Both were in favor of killing the development outright.

Taking a more moderate stance were Bob Blakeley, Wayne Schooley and Stan Alexander who felt that a commitment had already been made to allow the shopping center and that a compromise plan to address the main concerns of the citizens would be the most fair and equitable solution.

In a 3-2 vote, the Council ultimately voted to adopt a revised plan similar to that proposed by Monty Murphy. The approved plan called for Abbey and Berkshire to remain dead-ended at Surry Place, which would remain open but would not be widened. To allay privacy concerns, the shopping center was required to install a sight-proof fence and would setback far enough from adjacent residential property to minimize potential gawking from second story windows. The developers were also required to install a retention pond to temporarily impound rainwater and keep Britton Road from being inundated by the noteworthy cloudbursts that so typically, and all too frequently, decant from our stormy and turbulent Oklahoma skies.

Despite the approved compromise plan, some citizens were still not satisfied and (a few months later) petitioned the Council to close Surry Place. The Council, however, tabled action on the petition and the matter was never taken up thereafter.

The Collonade has been a moderately successful retail and commercial area, --one that has endured, despite its shortcomings, for almost thirty years. The development clearly has been hindered by a lack of visibility from May Avenue as is evidenced by the vacancies that persist almost three decades after the development was established. Not that there haven't been bona fide efforts to fill the available spots.

Most notable of these efforts was an application in the early '80s to build a Red Lobster restaurant in the center. Unfortunately, Red Lobster got crabby when

the city disallowed the serving of alcohol on the premises. Red Lobster, not able to fathom the conservative temperament of the community, hoisted its anchor and set sail in search of more friendly seas. Other subsequent attempts to fill the empty site have, for one reason or another, met with similar fate. Overall, it seems that the Collonade has been a successful venture. Perhaps, with the correct spelling, the shopping center would have fared even better. Maybe not.