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IU Law School & The Fraternity Flap

It was about five years ago that I was talking to then-Indiana University trustee Steve Ferguson, and the Cook Group chairman confided something to me.

IU's Maurer School of Law had been ranked for the first time in the top ten of public law schools and it was an achievement that Ferguson, a Bloomington law school graduate, said he never thought he'd see happen.

Rankings don't mean everything, but they do lend prestige. The crowded conditions at the law school are not so attractive, however. "It was cramped when I went to school there," Ferguson lamented.

And then he got to the confiding, off-the-record part.

IU had a nice gift to go toward expansion of the building, which is hemmed in by Bryan Hall to the north, Dunn's Woods to the east, and South Indiana Avenue to the west. The only possible location for expansion was the Phi Gamma Delta, or Fiji, fraternity space to the south and east. And after months of negotiations, Ferguson said, the Fiji alumni board was still demanding an unreasonably high price for its space — prime property on campus already targeted for other uses in the university's master plan.

The typically unflappable Ferguson clearly was annoyed.

"Well," I said, "doesn't the university, as a public institution, have the power to claim the Fiji property through eminent domain?" Ferguson shook his head from side to side. Expropriating land through eminent domain is always controversial, and IU didn't want to go there, he said.

The university's decision last summer to offer the fraternity space at North Woodlawn Avenue and East 8th Street — and raze several old houses to make room for a new fraternity house — is a capitulation, not a power grab, as opponents of the plan have described it. No one I know in IU administration actually wants a fraternity there.

The arguments made by opponents of the Fiji relocation proposal certainly have merit. Fraternities are lively and sometimes noisy places that aren't compatible with a residential

neighborhood, and the proposed location falls within what is known as the University Courts neighborhood. The brick streets that remain in the area, the architectural character of the houses, the history of the core, old Bloomington neighborhood — all of these things, except for the brick streets, deserve due consideration. Brick streets invoke nostalgia but there are reasons why cities and towns did away with them, just as there were reasons we replaced dirt roads. There are better options.

"The problem is that not everything that's old is historic," says Ferguson, who I spoke with again in January. He's no longer a trustee, but he's tired of seeing IU getting beaten up over the proposal. "When you go through the neighborhood, it's mostly old houses that are run down or carved up with students living in them." And this comes from a man who, working with the late Bill Cook, has been involved with most of the important historic renovation and reuse projects in our area, ranging from saving the old Graham Plaza Hotel and the south side of the downtown Square to the \$500 million renovation of the French Lick Resort.

The unwillingness of the Fijis to compromise and take a spot on North Jordan Avenue is not drawing the heat that it should in this debate. Other greek houses packed up and left the core campus years ago — heeding the venerated Herman B Wells' desire to see IU's greek houses move to that region. Wells even directed his own fraternity, Sigma Nu, out to North Jordan a half-century ago.

Ferguson's family sold their longtime home on East 10th Street to IU in the early-1970s and arranged for matriarch Arlene to move so that IU could build the School of Public and Environmental Affairs. "Sometimes you have to think about the greater good," Ferguson said.

The Fijis seem to only be thinking about what is best for them.

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