

Chair Monique Heath, AIA
Board of Zoning Adjustments
1100 4th Street, SW, Suite 200S
Washington, DC 20024

December 14, 2015

Dear Chair Heath and Members of the Board,

I am writing to express my strong support for an application that is before the Board of Zoning Adjustment, regarding the project to redevelop St. Thomas Parish at 1772 Church Street, NW, BZA case number 19133.

I recognize that there is a vocal contingent of some of the neighbors to St. Thomas Parish that vehemently oppose the variance. While this contingent is loud and upset, and has been throughout the entire lengthy redevelopment process, St. Thomas and the partner developers have redesigned the project multiple times to try to meet the varying demands regarding the project. There have been numerous community forums, numerous ANC meetings, and most recently a good faith attempts to negotiate a Memorandum of Understanding ("MOU"), which at the last minute the ANC rejected due to their legal uncertainty as to whether they understood how to enforce an MOU.

I live in Ward 7, because I found it difficult to find affordable housing for my family in Ward 2, but I work in Ward 2 and attend St. Thomas Parish on Sundays and for various other programs they have throughout the week. I spend the majority of the day, at least six days a week, in Ward 2, and I have vested interest in this part of our city. I would love to have the opportunity to move to Church Street and be a "Neighbor of St. Thomas" someday.

I am sure you have been briefed on the predicament of the church: arsoned in 1970, opening its doors to the marginalized LGBTQ community, never being able to afford to rebuild after the fire, and currently residing in the parish office building with its walls that were never meant to be open to the elements and its stairs that can't accommodate disabled parishioners or coffins for funerals. I know these facts don't concern the neighbors and are only important to the parishioners, the Korean Presbyterian and the AXIOS GLBT Eastern Orthodox Christian churches that use the sanctuary. It might also be important to the Alcoholics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, and Gay And Married Men Association support groups that meet weekly at our church. However the real issue of concern for our neighbors is the redevelopment of the church park into a church and "massing."

Massing is a concern for the church as well. Local blogger and ANC2B resident David Alpert has repeatedly argued that putting a large church building on Church Street and 18th St. is a return to, not a deviation from the historic norm:

"The original church was also large and tall, though very different in design. Erecting a prominent building on this corner actually restores, rather than damages, this characteristic of

the historic district during its period of significance."

(Source: <http://greatergreaterwashington.org/post/23514/is-a-big-building-incompatible-with-a-historic-area/>)

It is not simply a return to historical prominence, in the face of 45 years of making a prayerful space in the ruins of arson, that motivates my support for the church's rebuilding; because while churches lean heavily on history, our duty is to being present for those seeking a spiritual home in the community now and in the future. But this is where the parish's other "massing" concern comes into play. Lots of people know the St. Thomas ruins park, but many fewer people know the St. Thomas ruins parish that lives on behind. Take a look at our Yelp page and please note that several years ago one reviewer wrote:

"For years, I've been walking down 18th street past the park here with the burned out shell of a church and thought to myself, "Wow. that's pretty." Only recently did I realize that it's an actual functional church, and I was only being the side of it. So, continuing on my self-tour of DC area churches, I wandered in one sunny Sunday (found the entrance on Church St between 18th and 17th) and attended services in the cozy upstairs..."

We know that massing is an issue. We know that massing is an issue for the multiple congregations and groups who meet in our inadequate and failing facilities. We know that massing is a historical issue, putting the church back prominently on Church St. at its 18th Street corner. We know that massing is an issue regarding people knowing we exist, and finding the nontraditional welcome we have to offer, especially to LGBTQ individuals who have historically had a difficult time finding a Christian worship space. I ask that you approve the zoning variance allowing us to use 86.5% of the lot rather than the zoned 80%, because we seek only to finally rebuild the church we lost, and because it has taken us so long, in fits and starts, to rise from the arsonist's ashes.

The St. Thomas Parish project constitutes an exceptional situation, because of the historical circumstance of our specific piece of property. The strict application of regulations adopted under D.C. Official Code §§ 6-641.01 to 6-651.02 would result in continued exceptional practical difficulties to the church in its attempt to rebuild in the face of arson, while trying to maintain a retrofitted parish hall building that continues to drain our financial resources originally set aside to rebuild. To authorize this variance from the strict application would allow us to finally begin the rebuilding process with the plans that have already been presented to and approved by the Historic Preservation Review Board. The zoning relief can be granted without substantial detriment to the public good or significant variance from the zone plan as embodied in the zoning regulations. This variance would finally allow St. Thomas Parish to rebuild the church building it has been striving to make feasible for 45 years.

Thank you for your consideration,

-Josh Easterson

An Independent Member of St. Thomas Parish