

**Church Street Neighbors Testimony
Board of Zoning Adjustment Hearing
Case 19133 – St. Thomas Episcopal Parish
December 15, 2015**

Good morning Board Members. I am Scott Royal. I live at 1779 Church Street, right across the street from St. Thomas' Parish, and am a twelve year resident of the immediate neighborhood. I am pleased to be here representing CHURCH STREET NEIGHBORS (CSN). Our grassroots coalition includes about 24 members. Close to 40 more supporters have joined us in writing to BZA to oppose the lot occupancy variance.

I hope I can assure you that we are reasonable people who support the church's decision to rebuild, and at the same time, we are coalition of neighbors that works to safeguard the historic and residential character of the 1700 block of Church Street and its surrounding blocks. We believe that rebuilding the church and historic preservation can both be achieved while adhering to lot occupancy regulations and other regulatory requirements.

The CSN coalition has been working for almost two years –from just after the plans for the St. Thomas's Parish redevelopment project were publically announced in February 2014. Neighbors began to meet informally, but regularly, to search for a pathway to preserve the uniqueness of Church Street.

As an aside, I will acknowledge up front that losing the beloved park was a surprise and shock, and the neighbors' initial response, predictably, was to try to save it and help the church find another way to rebuild. We held countless meetings among ourselves, reaching out to the broader community, and making a direct appeal to the Diocese to broker a dialogue with the Church. We were not successful in that regard and many of us resolved to focus on historic preservation so that the residential building and the new church that would replace the park would be positive additions to the neighborhood.

The initial designs for the St. Thomas' project showed a six story church of little architectural distinction and an abutting residential building that could be described as an 8 story rectangular big-box covering two-thirds of the property. One would think that a community minded designer, cognizant that the project's site is within an historic district, would have taken the responsibility of working in that context more seriously. The neighbors, quite reasonably, were taken aback.

Neighbors' objections were not related to the desire of the church to rebuild, but to the impact that the design and mass of the proposed buildings would have on the low scale residential neighborhood. While a number of the letters on the BZA website paint neighbors as obstructionists, I want to emphasize to you that we are not against the construction of a new church or a residential building. We are, though, concerned about the future of the street and the neighborhood and the erosion of the historic character of Dupont Circle generally. What is constructed on this plot of land will be there permanently. This must not be taken lightly.

Had those early plans shown sensitivity to the historic character of the neighborhood, much time could have been put to better use. CSN became a more formal coalition as we engaged in the Historic Preservation Review Board process. A number of HPRB members had serious concerns with the treatment of the site, requiring the developer to return with revised plans. The revisions included setbacks at the upper levels which the applicant has indicated is lower than the allowable Floor Area Ratio (FAR). The FAR, however, should have no bearing on lot occupancy requirements. .

The requested variance would add almost 9 percent to the building's size, or approximately 1000 square feet per floor for at least the first four floors, thus adding significantly to the mass of the building. This is not consistent with the Dupont Circle Overlay District provisions cited in the Office of Planning report.

Equally important is the strongly negative effect of the buildings on traffic safety, traffic congestion and parking, especially on narrow, one-way Church Street and in the alley between Church and P Streets. The project will seriously hamper the free circulation of vehicles in these already heavily trafficked areas. Even if the alley is widened from 12 feet to 18 feet up to the parking garage, as the DDOT report proposes, the potential for congestion is significant. Moreover, the traffic study on which the DDOT report is based does not take into account increased future uses of the church as it rents its spaces for wedding receptions and other functions. The probability of catering trucks and other delivery trucks entering, departing and idling will add to pollution and to traffic and parking congestion, and could affect pedestrian safety. The DDOT report also notes that delivery trucks larger than 24 feet will require permitted on street parking, which would mean temporary parking on Church Street. We are concerned that the impacts of these activities will be substantial and they have not been taken into consideration.

Furthermore, those living close to the project, as I do, will be deprived of light, and, certainly airflow will be diminished. While the original church on this property was large, its cruciform shape left substantial green space and its height was not uniform. Every attempt should be made to maximize greenspace and access to light and free flow of air, consistent with applicable regulatory requirements.

In conclusion, I stress that Church Street Neighbors does not oppose St. Thomas' Parish rebuilding its church or selling the majority of its land for a residential building compatible with the scale of the block. What we strongly oppose is the requested variance or any other action that would allow the building to be more massive than permitted by DC law and policy.

There are reasonable options consistent with both the Dupont Circle Overlay and the needs of the church. Permitting a larger building would further exacerbate the damage to neighbors related to increased traffic congestion, loss of green space, light, and air flow. These outcomes and losses will endure for decades, if not another century. Finally, if the applicant's discussion of "viability" at the December 9th ANC meeting relates to a level of profit for his business, that is not an appropriate rationale for a variance.

We believe that building in an historic district is a privilege, not a hardship.

88% of the neighbors within 200 feet who have expressed their opinion in writing to the BZA as of 5:30 yesterday oppose the increased lot occupancy. A variance would be an affront to the historical integrity and scale of the neighborhood. At the very first public meeting about this project, the applicant was asked if the project would require any zoning variance. The answer was no. We respectfully ask that you say **no** today.

Thank you for your attention.

Testimony presented by Scott Royal on behalf of Church Street Neighbors