

Dear Chairperson Heath and members of the Board of Zoning Adjustment,

My name is David Alpert. I am a resident of 1769 Church Street, nearly directly across the street from the St. Thomas parish house. I also am founder and President of Greater Greater Washington, an organization that runs a news website about urban planning and transportation and builds informed and civically engaged communities who believe in a growing and inclusive Washington region.

Greater Greater Washington has long reported on the fact that living in our wonderful city and region is fast becoming out of reach for more and more people, driving long-time residents out and making the economic opportunity of our region inaccessible to many who want to be a part of our communities. While this project will not single-handedly end the housing shortage nor will it create large quantities of affordable housing (though, thanks to inclusionary zoning, it will create some), this project will add needed housing in an area, right near a Metro station, ideally suited for it.

My wife, 2-year-old daughter, and I love the park at the corner of 18th and Church Streets, but we also recognize that this park is private property and the ruins of a house of worship, one which has the right to create a new space. If the park is to disappear, as is virtually certain, it is best to maximize the opportunity to add housing and use the space for other public policy goals.

As part of my work, I have followed and written about many development projects. I have seen, over and over, communities ANCs that engage meaningfully with projects and negotiate for measures that affect the quality of life for neighbors. I've also seen, over and over, communities and ANCs which stubbornly dig in their heels and fight a project each step of the way with little effect.

In recent prior development projects such as another mixed-use development on church land at 17th and O, ANC 2B fell into the former category. To my great sadness, it has chosen the latter path in this case, likely to the detriment of many people on this block in the long run.

In this project, I served as a member of a committee, led by the ANC 2B Zoning, Preservation, and Development Committee chair, which negotiated a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the applicants modeled in part on the successful 15-year-old agreement for the Phillips Collection a short distance to the west.

This MOU includes meaningful and important protections for residents around construction impacts and long-term impacts such as roof deck noise, while not impeding the core effects of the plan: For St. Thomas to gain a new worship space, and to create new housing in this well-suited location.

Sadly, most members of ANC 2B forsook this opportunity and chose instead to dig in their heels and tilt at windmills. The ANC passed up a good deal to roll the dice between two options, neither of which is better for the community: Have the variance approved (as it should be) with no MOU, and see the building built without neighbor-requested protections; or see the variance rejected, yet still get a building of nearly-identical size, identical from adjacent streets, with almost no added benefit to neighbors and, again, no MOU protections.

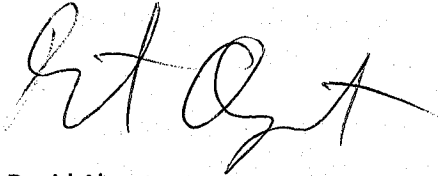
This developer has bent over backward to accommodate reasonable neighbor requests since coming onto the project nearly two whole years ago. One neighbor, for instance, asked for a setback along the alley which CAS Riegler readily incorporated. Nor did they have to engage in this MOU negotiation; given the ANC's shameful handling of this situation, they may well regret doing so.

They have gone far beyond the level of engagement I have seen in many other projects. I hope you will render a decision in this case that will encourage CAS Riegler and other developers to do the same even when some opposition is implacable.

Please don't punish either St. Thomas or surrounding neighbors for ANC 2B's irresponsibility. There was a deal on the table a week ago: The MOU and support for the variance. You can still push for this outcome. Please approve the variance and, if this is permissible, incorporate key terms of the MOU in the zoning order, or if that is no longer accepted practice, simply ask the applicant to still complete the MOU with the individual neighbors and ANC commissioners in their individual capacities who were already willing to sign.

I hope you do not, however, impose any further delay on this community institution which deserves, and has a right, to create a new worship space and this opportunity to create needed housing. Thank you for your time and attention to this issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Alpert', written in a cursive style.

David Alpert
1769 Church St. NW