

Good morning, Madam Mayor, Councilman Evans, and others for whom this is a concern,

My name is Jessica Brewster. I am a long term member of St. Thomas Parish, a current member of the vestry, as well as a resident of the District of Columbia and assistant principal in one of the District's charter schools. I fully support the building project and the building variance for which we have applied.

This has been a long road for this parish. Years before I was born and before I moved to Washington, D.C. a beautiful church burned to the ground. It was a parish that had been the spiritual home to presidents and neighborhood residents alike. It was a parish that lived out its mission to serve all regardless of difference. Over time, they created a park on the property that they graciously shared with the neighborhood despite the disregard shown for such a sacred space by many in their littering and negligence in picking up after their pets. When I became a member of the parish, the community was just finally feeling ready to build something new. The old wounds had healed and they needed a building that proclaimed what all those who made it inside knew: this is a place for all God's children! You are not only welcome here, but you are safe here.

As a community we spent a long time discerning what we needed in a space and then we began dreaming. Our first iteration did not come to fruition because despite its beauty, it was not going to meet our needs and would not be financially viable. So, we mourned its loss and we moved forward. We met with experts in architecture, diocesan finances, and capital campaigns to determine our next steps. The building project that has been presented is the fruit of that discernment and labor. It is a space that proclaims: we are a church! Come, see how good God is and how well loved you are as a child of God!

The new building will not only have a worship space large enough to accommodate our growing congregation, but spaces for learning, working, and celebrating together. Those spaces will be available not only to our parish community, but to our diocesan community and our city community as a whole. These spaces provide something we are unable to currently provide despite how central community is to our mission and life as a church.

In our early meetings with the ANC, we met with opposition. We, as a church, have done our very best to listen with open hearts to that opposition and address it. However, in my heart of hearts, I do not believe it is reasonable to oppose a project on something such as the loss of a private park. It is my firm belief that opposition is coming based more on an overwhelming attitude that "others are not welcome here." This is an attitude that flies in the face of everything we, as a church community, stand for. This feeling has tugged on my heart strings each time I have sat in a meeting. It has pained me deeply most pointedly because it is never stated out right, but instead is veiled in privilege and vitriolic speech regarding parks, height of buildings, and requests for traffic studies or rodent control. But, perhaps I am wrong. If so, I am sorry for thinking something so negative about others as pessimism is not naturally my way.

The bottom line at this point is this: we have the approval of the Historic Preservation Review Board, we have the approval of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, and this zoning variance is the last in a long line of hurdles we have jumped to make our church home what it needs to be. The request for 86.7% lot coverage is actually a very small difference. If we were to be denied, then the scaling back of the building would be minor. It would lead to a little less building most likely on the alley side. This scaling back would not lead to the private park remaining for public use.

I know you have to do all in your power to meet the needs of your constituents. I am not a resident of Councilman Evans ward, but I am a resident of your city, Madam Mayor. I implore you to recognize how necessary this building is and how negligible the variance is in terms of meeting our opposition's needs.

With sincere thanks for your consideration,
Jessica Brewster