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Board of Zoning Adjustment
DC Office of Zoning
441 4th Street NW Suite 200S
Washington, DC 20001

Members of the BZA:

I write as a member of St. Thomas' Episcopal Parish in Dupont Circle and wholeheartedly lend my support to our request for a variance. St. Thomas' has been my church home for about 8 years, about as long as I've been a resident of the DC area. During that time I've been a worshiper, Sunday school teacher, committee chair, and now a member of the vestry (the governing board). I have also been active in the long-running attempt to build a new church to replace the structure that burned in 1970 and the now crumbling building that is too small for our growing needs and largely inaccessible for those with disabilities.

Part of that involvement included being part of a group of "Parish Ambassadors" to discern the right path for us to pursue in the latest part of our quest to rebuild. After much listening, prayer, and discussion, we decided that the best way to proceed would be to work with a developer (CAS Riegler) who would buy part of the current parcel of land to construct a building of residential units. That sale would then fund the construction of a new church. We and later the building committee carefully weighed all of the necessary factors and agreed on a design that we believe would fit in with the neighborhood, be a structure looking ahead to the future, and suit the needs of the parish and the larger community. I fully support the design our architect has produced and the efforts they, the parish, and CAS Riegler to listen to our neighbors and address their concerns. Indeed, the Historic Preservation Review Board has approved the design.

Despite our good faith efforts, there has been a small but extremely vocal number of people in the area who have tried to block our efforts. There have been some legitimate concerns raised, and I believe we have done our best to respond to them and adjust the designs accordingly. However, even before those plans were developed, there have been those who have vehemently opposed any attempt on our part to build a new church. I still remember the first meeting I went to on the issue and vividly recall the abuse heaped upon us with people calling us money-grubbers and liars and saying we should leave so that they can have "their park." In fact that park is private church property that we have generously allowed the community to use despite the verbal and sometimes even physical abuse our staff and members have received from our supposed "neighbors."

Regarding the issue of the building variance up before the BZA, I am not an architect, but neither are any of these neighborhood activists or the ANC members. I, however, trust our architect and developer when they say that they need the 6.7% variance and that they have tried every way possible to keep it within 80% and still be a viable project.

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I was also shocked and disheartened by Councilman Jack Evans' vehement opposition to our efforts, even going so far at the DCCA meeting this past Monday that the design and our efforts to respond to neighborhood concerns were ludicrous. The processes for assessing and approving news buildings such as these (particularly churches) should be as far away from the political whims as possible, and his recent involvement in the matter is not only unproductive but highly inappropriate.

This project of rebuilding our church is not a matter of "Oh, it would be a nice thing to do." Instead, it's a matter of vital importance to our continued existence as a vibrant parish of this diocese and as a fixture in the Dupont Circle community for well over a hundred years. I believe this new building would ensure that we will be there as an active and essential part for at least another century.

Sincerely,
Kevin Montgomery