

February 27, 2017

Board of Zoning Adjustment
D.C. Office of Zoning
4th Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20001

Re: Testimony in opposition to Special Exceptions/Variances
Case # 14952

Dear Chairperson Hill, Ms. White and Mr. Hart:

As a homeowner and longtime resident of ANC SMD 5B03, I urge you to deny the special exceptions requested by the Department of General Services to construct and operate a temporary homeless shelter at 1700 Rhode Island Avenue N.E. (hereinafter, 1700 RIA).

The requested variances seek to increase occupancy by a factor of 37%, building height by 39% and the floor area ratio by more than 40%, while reducing the required open area by a factor of 28%. Such exceptions will create an architectural clash of enormous proportion with the surrounding 1920 bungalow-style homes, while forcing the predominantly elderly residents of the neighborhood to literally live in the shadow of this proposed colossus. Those same elderly residents will be subjected to further inestimable hardship by the inevitable traffic and parking morass that is certain to ensue from such a project. For the sake of the homeless families that will be jammed into this wholly inappropriate site, as well as the aggrieved senior citizen neighbors, please deny the city's requested special exceptions.

One conspicuous fact that stands out in the history of this project are the numerous admissions made by principal city officials acknowledging the impropriety of the proposed shelter site. Those include:

1. Mayor Bowser's May 27, 2016 letter to Chairman Mendelson describing the site as "constrained;" *See* <https://dmhhs.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/mayormb/publication/attachments/Letter%20from%20the%20Mayor%20re%20Short%20Term%20Family%20Housing%20Plan%205.27.2016.pdf>
2. City Administrator, Rashad Young's April 11, 2016 description of the former MPD Youth Division (hereinafter MPD YD) at 1700 RIA as "[n]ot large enough;" *See* http://mayor.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/mayormb/page_content/attachments/Langdon_Park_Response_Letter_4-7-2016.pdf, and
3. Ward 5 Councilman McDuffie's Jan. 17, 2017 correspondence to Directors Gillis and Zeilinger conceding the unmanageable size of the project on such a small property. In his email to the Directors Councilman McDuffie wrote:

As you are aware, Ward 5 residents have continued to express concerns about the height of the proposed Ward 5 Shelter. While I understand the inherent challenges of getting all of the needed units and amenities on a small footprint, on behalf of the impacted neighbors, I ask that you expend every resource available to come up with a creative way of reducing the height of the building to something more manageable for its neighbors.

Now these same officials ask the BZA to approve a plan that each of them, to varying extent, has recognized as improper. On the contrary, the BZA should reject the city's requests for special exceptions in accordance with the recent letter by Thomas E. Luebke, FAIA, of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts (CFA) citing the "challenges inherent to the site, . . . [and] the difficulty of designing a new building that can reasonably meet the specified program." Mr. Luebke states that the CFA "observed that the proposed massing is too tall for its context, appears bulky and overwhelms the historic Colonial Revival-style building" designed by Albert L. Harris. In conclusion, he notes that the CFA "anticipates the submission of a new concept design . . . that responds to its comments." See <https://www.cfa.gov/records-research/project-search/cfa-16feb17-8>.

By rejecting the city's requested special exceptions, the BZA will place itself in the company of many other distinguished and thoughtful city planners who authored the likes of the 2014 DC Department of Transportation's *RIA Streetscape Master Plan* and the 2011 Small Area Plan ("SAP"), *Rhode Island Avenue: Diamond of the District*. These plans articulate discrete prescriptions to make the Rhode Island Avenue corridor an attractive destination for future commercial and residential mixed-use growth and development. Notably, the Small Area Plan:

recommends that new licenses for storefront churches, check cashing services, addiction treatment facilities, half-way houses, and group residential facilities [be] extremely limited or prohibited.

SAP, page 4.

In tandem these two documents are visionary guideposts for the BZA in answering the question it is being asked to rule on today. The *RIA Streetscape Master Plan* cites, "[o]ne of the key assets of the corridor [is] its fabric of existing historic buildings (Master Plan, page 3) and recognizes the "opportunity for the preservation of the Police Youth Station" (SAP, page 14). Instead, the city proposes to demolish the latter third of this historic building in its quest to realize this hastily devised project. The CFA letter is also instructional here, when it observed:

When sites are selected quickly, initial feasibility studies may reveal that specific building programs need to be adjusted, requiring more flexibility in following guidelines as the designs for the new . . . multi-family housing projects are tested for real neighborhood sites.

On behalf of the nearly 300 SMD 5B03 residents who petitioned in opposition to this project as currently proposed, but are unable to be here today, I respectfully ask the BZA to acknowledge this widespread citizen opposition, and join the CFA, while following the prescient advice of the aforementioned city planners, and deny the city's request for special exceptions to the zoning regulations.

Thank you,

Joseph Cassidy
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SMD 5B03