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A fight for Brookland's soul

By Tom Kirlin February 24

The District's homeless rate increased 34.2 percent between 2009 and 2016, "the highest rate of homelessness" among 32 major cities, according to the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

Last year, D.C. Mayor Muriel E. Bowser (D) presented a humane way forward: build 50-family facilities in all eight wards. Unfortunately, the D.C. Council selected 1700 Rhode Island Avenue NE, a former police station, after Langdon Park rejected a shelter next to warehouses and bus facilities.

It may seem like a rational choice: The District owns the land, a Metro station is a mile away, buses pass its front door, a library and park are a block away. But the proposed building will be 70 feet tall (20 feet higher than zoning regulations), has three of 22 needed parking spaces and abuts an electrified cell tower. So the District needs Board of Zoning Adjustment "special exceptions" for this 150-bed, 47,000-square-foot shelter for height, lot occupancy, bed number, floor area ratio, parking, loading dock and its rear, side and courtyard widths.

The Board of Zoning Adjustment hearing is Wednesday. But the fight over *this site* is not, at heart, a zoning battle, nor a rejection of the homeless. It is a development fight, a fair housing fight, a fight for Brookland's soul.

Decades ago, D.C. residents created an "Emergency Committee on the Transportation Crisis" to stop a six-lane freeway from being built from Interstate 495 into downtown. The city drew up elaborate plans, exercised eminent domain, purchased 64 houses and proudly marched forward — to defeat. That concrete runway does not exist. Instead, people ride the Red Line that serves Brookland, Fort Totten, Silver Spring and beyond.

Today, bullet points and bayonets fly in Ward 5's shelter fight — lot size, bed numbers, height, who parks where, agencies bullying agencies. And across Brookland's sleepy hills, citizens are waking to fight city hall

Board of Zoning Adjustment
District Council
CASE NO. 19452
EXHIBIT NO. 198

and developers (who make campaign contributions) so that we may experience our legal right to “the quiet enjoyment of our domicile.”

That challenge grows more formidable. By 2020 more than 4,300 apartments and condos will have been built within a mile of the Rhode Island Metro station. If built, the 1700 Rhode Island shelter would be 550 feet from the 1545 Girard Street Apartments, advertised as 25 “affordable luxury apartments for seniors” and which will house “10 formerly chronically homeless individuals.” They will live 205 feet from the Violet Project at 1515 Rhode Island Avenue NE, a 23-unit residence now under construction, that includes at least three low-income units. It is 415 feet from the 1500 Franklin Street Veterans Administration Community Resource and Referral Center, a “24/7 hub to combat homelessness among veterans.” That is 280 feet from the National Center for Children and Families at 1438 Rhode Island, a referral facility that serves “homeless families, victims of domestic violence, and children and adolescents.” And that is 450 feet from Brookland Manor at 1331 Rhode Island Avenue NE, a 20-acre, 19-building site with 535 low-income housing units, soon to be replaced by 1,760 residential units, including 200 senior and 265 low-income housing units as its developers set aside 20 percent (instead of the required 10 percent) for “affordable units.” And 1814 Hamlin, Pleasant Hill, House of Togetherness, Andrus House and other community-based residential facilities all lie within a four-block radius of the proposed shelter.

The city’s own Department of Housing and Community Development best describes our plight: “*the severe concentration of community-based residential facilities in the Northeast quadrant . . . [creates] a de facto service district which undermines the ability of community residents to achieve the goal of normalization and community integration.*”

Already a Department of Motor Vehicles office, District Family Court, Family Resource Center and probation office occupy ⁷⁰the block. Next proposal? A 300-bed shelter for recently released male prisoners four blocks away, between two elementary schools.

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Citizens for Responsible Options, a local group, will argue to the Board of Zoning Adjustment that the District cannot legally build a shelter there because the Council failed to prove that “no other reasonable alternative [exists] to meet the program needs of that area of the District.”

No one wants the Board of Zoning Adjustment to make 70-foot-tall tall buildings the new normal next to bungalows. Whatever the Board of Zoning Adjustment’s ruling, Citizens for Responsible Options will

continue to fight, not because we lack charity — Brookland embraces the living and the dead with seminaries, cemeteries, monasteries and mortuaries — but because we're charitable, stubborn cousins. We don't tolerate abuse.

We challenge the district and the Board of Zoning Adjustment to comply with the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Citizens for Responsible Options will help officials find a "reasonable alternative" to this "severely concentrated . . . service district."

Why jeopardize federal funds for needed D.C. homeless housing? Why force one more project on a crowded few blocks of Rhode Island Avenue?

Tom Kirlin is a member of Citizens for Responsible Options.