

**Case #05-39**

REC.

05-39

D.C. OFFICE OF ZONING

2006 NOV 20 PM 1:30

D.C. OFFICE OF ZONING

RECEIVED

Dear Sirs,

I am writing to ask that you deny the request by Catholic Community Services (CCS) and the Archdiocese of Washington to rezone the property from R-4 to R-5 in order to build a large apartment building. I live directly across the street from the proposed site on Todd Place. There are a lot of problems with the current design as well as the way the matter was handled by CCS and the developer, Neal Drobenare.

First and foremost, the building is just too big for the site. It will be across the street from row houses that are 2 stories high and even McKinley Tech which is only 3 stories high. Because it is so large and poorly designed, it will be disconnected from the surrounding community. As stated in the zoning regulations, the primary purpose of R-4 zoning is "the stabilization of remaining one-family dwellings." It is not fair to me and the other residents that you can just change your minds to suit the whim of developers who are out to make a quick buck and need the economies of scale in order to achieve that goal.

The current building is designed around 2 enclosed courtyards that are not visible from the street. Any law enforcement officer will tell you that this can be problematic. I would like to see row houses in a similar design and scale to the existing houses built on the site. They should be no taller than the existing row houses measured from the street. They should have an alley behind them for parking and trash like the existing houses do. This would allow the residents to be a part of this community and not be physically separated from their neighbors. The Ellen Wilson Townhomes are a good example of thoughtful urban design.

There is a beautiful, old convent that sits on top of the hill. Under the latest plan, it will be moved to a corner of the lot and the behemoth complex built around it. Once again, the residents were not consulted nor asked. Apparently the DCPL made a deal with Mr. Drobenare to keep the shell of the building only. It will not be designated an historic landmark. There is a similar convent (Bon Secours) by the same architect which received landmark designation in a more affluent part of town. Is our history and architecture any less important?

The density of such a large building will aggravate the existing traffic and parking problems. The site is adjacent to 3 schools. You can imagine what the traffic is like during drop off on school days. Did the traffic study take this into account? In addition, 100 parking spaces are not going to ameliorate the parking problems all of these additional cars will cause. Because they will be charged an additional monthly fee to use the garage, many people will choose to park on the street for free. There are currently 50-60 cars parked on the site every day. I assume these are teachers and staff from the adjacent schools. Will they be using the parking garage as well? If so, the net gain for parking spaces will only be 40-50 spaces for up to 300 new cars.

Currently, the building is being built using the low income housing tax credit (LIHTC) and will be comprised of low and very low income residents. One of the tenets of the Mayor's New Communities Initiative as well as the Comprehensive Plan is to "transform highly concentrated low income neighborhoods into healthy mixed-income neighborhoods." Most people would not consider a building consisting of very low income and low income to be mixed-income. In fact, it would be considered concentrated low income. Once the building is brought back down to the correct size, I would hope that CCS would heed all of the research and studies that show that economic segregation is unhealthy. By allowing a true mix of incomes, they will be forced to keep the property up to market standards which will benefit the residents as well as the neighborhood. They won't even allow those making 60-80% of the area median income to live here. This is the salary range that a lot of the teachers fall into and it is next to 4 schools!

ZONING COMMISSION  
District of Columbia

CASE NO. 05-39

ZONING COMMISSION  
District of Columbia  
CASE NO. 05-39  
EXHIBIT NO. 33

Now on to how they have handled engaging the neighborhood. The Comprehensive Plan also states that “community participation in the planning process is also essential to ensure that programs and actions are effective in meeting community needs, including a desired sense of community cohesion.” They have failed miserably in this aspect. My husband and I first learned about the project a year ago in September. One of our neighbor’s mothers is a parishioner at St. Martins church and told us about a meeting they were having concerning a new apartment building they were constructing across the street from us. We decided to go to the meeting. Neal Drobenare made the presentation. We later learned that this was probably the 10<sup>th</sup> meeting they had had and the planning process was already complete. Unfortunately, most of the people who were in the previous meetings were parishioners and not residents of the community. It didn’t sound too bad at first. Mr. Drobenare said it was going to be for our teachers, fire fighters and law enforcement personnel who have a hard time finding affordable housing. I lived in “poor people housing” (that’s what they called it back then) growing up in West Virginia so I know how necessary it is. I also know how problematic it can be if not done right. I went home and did some research. I discovered that since the building was being built with 100% of the units financed by the LIHTC, most of our fire fighters, teachers and law enforcement personnel make too much money to qualify to live there. We started asking questions and were either ignored or lied to. We talked to a lot of our neighbors and found out that they didn’t know about the project either. In October, the project came before the ANC for a vote. Mr. Drobenare said that the community had been informed of and a part of the development process. This was a lie. Most of the community had no idea about this project. The legal notices were not even sent out until 2 months later. ANC Commissioner Cleopatra Jones is a parishioner of the church and should have known this as she was apparently present at a lot of the meetings. I don’t think people who live in Maryland and Virginia should have been included while the people who live across the street were excluded from the development process. The ANC approved the project pending the outcome of the traffic study based on false information. At this point we decided to pass out a flyer to our neighbors.

We went door-to-door meeting and talking to our neighbors to let them know about the proposed project. Most of them were shocked to learn of it. We encouraged them to speak up and ask questions. In response, Mr. Drobenare hired a PR firm for spin instead of listening to us and addressing our concerns. They passed out misleading flyers that culminated in the pep rally in March. What was supposed to finally be our community meeting after months of requests, turned into a St. Martins support rally. Once again our concerns were not addressed and the neighborhood felt slighted. After this tactic failed, Mr. Drobenare tried to make it a class and racial issue by saying things like “some people would like us to build expensive condos here” and Father Kelly saying we were “new white people trying to take control of the neighborhood”. My husband is mixed race, our child is mixed race, and I am white. One of the reasons we moved here was because of the racial diversity. This was all in an effort to detract attention away from the real issues and problems which are the size and design. In response, we got together as a neighborhood and formed the group Eckington Citizens for Responsible Development (ECRD). We are comprised of all races, ages, longevity, and economic classes.

Now to address the issues with the ANC. I don’t think it was ethical for parishioners of the church who are ANC Commissioners to try to push this through without the full consent and knowledge of the residents. My ANC Commissioner, Mary Farmer-Allen refused to even discuss the issue. She said she is for the project and doesn’t care what the residents think. I saw a copy of the February agenda and St. Martins was not listed so I emailed the Chairperson, Diane Barnes, to ask if it would be on the agenda. She said that the agenda was already set and St. Martins was not on it. Well imagine our surprise when at the meeting, the St. Martins traffic study was presented. This was the final step they needed for approval of the project. Once again we were lied to and misinformed. After much debate, the ANC voted ~~6-5~~ to accept the traffic study but not necessarily the results.

Finally in May, they agreed to meet and have substantive talks about our concerns. We met, they listened, they changed nothing. So after this long story, you can see why we have very little trust in them.

I recognize the need for decent affordable housing in the city. Ideally, we should provide home-ownership opportunities so that people can amass wealth through equity and have a vested interest in their neighborhood. Because they don't have to pay for the land, CCS has a unique opportunity here to build something we can all be proud now and 20 years from now. It is a shame they have not learned from past mistakes and even other Archdioceses and taken a more enlightened approach to building much-needed affordable housing.

Sincerely,



Susan Lilavois  
130 Todd PI NE

***Historically, the design of public housing focused on building the maximum number of units for minimum cost, resulting in the current problems today associated with public housing nationwide – developments... The physical plans often call for reducing density, building single-family units that face the street, improving security through physical enhancements and connecting the development with the surrounding community.***

#### ***Hope VI Newsletter***

***While development is viewed as the economic engine of the District, protecting the integrity of neighborhoods is equally important. The Development Review Division encourages growth in a way that is sensitive to the needs and values of neighborhoods.***

#### ***Office of Planning***

***Tax credits are very valuable stimulus but there is a lot...a lot...of corruption and profiteering in this.***

***Yes—mixed -income/use is preferable – we are strong believers in this concept as well as scattered site housing—tougher and more expensive to manage scattered site but can use neighbors as role models, integrates families more fully into neighborhood...***

#### ***Catholic Charities-Florida***

***This program interest is based on the assertion that one of the major contributors to persistent poverty is its concentration. American housing policies and patterns have led to significant racial and economic segregation.***

***Over the past decade, there has been a very promising move toward mixed-income housing as an alternative approach to segregation by income in American housing programs.***

#### ***Ford Foundation***

***Living a life is like constructing a building: if you start wrong, you'll end wrong.***

***Maya Angelou***