

GWU's Future as Seen from "Ward 10"

Testimony before the DC Zoning Commission, September 25, 2006

by Leonard Sullivan, Jr., president

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(| = verbal summary)

Good evening, Madam Chair. My name is Len Sullivan. I am president of NARPAC, Inc., known to some as "Ward 10". We try to speak for Americans beyond DC interested in the stature and prestige of their nation's capital. We are all stakeholders in DC's future development and image.

It is, after all, *our* capital too. Ward 10 taxpayers pay over 21% of DC's bills, hire 11% of its city workers, and do several city tasks. National, not local, activities provide well over 90% of the attractions that draw people to visit, work, or live here, and probably generate 75% of its better paying jobs. We provide 85% of DC's park space, and maintain over 100 miles of its major roads.

NARPAC's '05 website analysis of this "vitriolic battle for GWU space and land use" concluded that:

There may be no overriding reason to:

encourage *further expansion* of GWU in the downtown area, *OR* to place a *fixed ceiling* on GWU's student or employee population within its *current boundaries*; *but*.

But it is surely unjustifiable to:

a) constrain on-campus growth by zoning limits substantially below those in its immediate surrounds *in the same time period*;

b) discourage any non-profit institution from creating development plans which *provide valuable revenues* to the city as well as valuable income to that institution; or

c) permit declining local neighborhoods to *veto continued urban development* around DC's vital metro stations, particularly based on specious argumentation

These issues may seem debatable in NIMBYLand, but we believe issues of land use and economic growth should be separated from those of disgruntled land owners, thoughtless college kids, and greedy university officials. Nonetheless, we congratulate the Office of Planning for negotiating the Town/Gown Treaty of Foggy Bottom, and GWU officials for removing their tin ear. But zoning compromises do not assure community harmony, nor do they enhance our capital city's stature.

ZONING COMMISSION
District of Columbia

CASE NO. 06-11
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Onward and Upward

We support the mantra of “grow up, not out” not just for this tract, *but for the entire city*, and would prefer “grow vertically, not horizontally”. We want it codified and vigorously applied. We would fully endorse a 21st Century Comprehensive Plan to make DC truly “three-dimensional”. Taller buildings, deeper basements; air- and dirt-rights; vertically-layered mobility; urban decks; raised parks, lowered parking; elevated metrorail, sunken highways; and a skyline with more character than a hedgerow.

We also suggest adopting a *4-D* zoning map with overlays projecting changes by the decade(?). Stop pretending each niggardly FAR increase is some final agonizing bargain with Devil Progress.

DC must keep growing in stature, as both our national capital and the region’s core city,....

DC’s first century involved populating its then-noticeable, now-trivial, “topographic bowl”, with a novel layout of dirt streets intended to defend the national capital against its own states. The second century fleshed out the rest of a diminished District, laid out to its boundaries with rectilinear city blocks for limited-mobility suburbanites, and tiny walk-to parks. In this century, DC becomes an ever-decreasing fraction of the population, land, and wealth of America’s national capital metro area. Though other nodes are forming, DC will retain the distinction of being the only urban hub in this metro area that houses our “federal city” and our national capitol.

Unless the US amends its constitution, DC will always retain a unique obligation to act and grow like a national (if not global) capital city, with large international and institutional facets. DC is *not* obliged to be the region’s poor house, its swankiest suburb, its mustiest museum, or its leading legacy to NIMBYism. DC is not a state, a metro area, or an independent political entity. It is too big and too late to be just a “central park”. It is a metropolitan focal point of global significance.

....GWU is smack in the path of DC’s growing cosmopolitan downtown area, and.....

The GWU Campus is within the sacred Topographic Bowl. It is part of the timeless 2-D L’Enfant Plan. It is virtually subsumed within “downtown”, on the borders of the Federal City, and on the way to picturesque Georgetown.. Its taller buildings look at the Washington Monument and the Potomac River. It fronts on the world’s best-known avenue, Pennsylvania Ave, and the world’s most influential street, K. Street. It is within walking distance (even student shuffling distance) of the White House, Lincoln Memorial, Kennedy Center, Corcoran Gallery, State Dept, Federal Reserve, World Bank, IMF, OAS, and PanAm Health Organization. GWU even owns the former motel from which the Nixon-tumbling Watergate break-in was orchestrated.

....Washington Circle cannot avoid being a major urban intermodal transportation hub.

GWU site encompasses the western-most metrorail station in DC, the public-transit gateway from Virginia’s Alexandria City, Arlington and Fairfax Counties. Foggy Bottom is the only metro station serving this growing area. It is the very essence of transit-oriented development and smart growth, as others will aver. And Washington Circle itself, the address for the outstanding new GWU Hospital, deserves to be one of the major “intermodal” centers for sorting urban mobility.

Let's recognize the anomalies in this zoning case for what they are

The real anachronisms here are the several blocks of minimally-zoned (FAR=3.5) single-family homes, reminiscent of equally attractive, more historic homes in Georgetown and Alexandria. They comprise way less than half of Foggy Bottom's residential units: the rest have already grown up to multi-unit apartments and condos, with a modest FAR=5.5. The remaining land within reach of this metro station is now zoned from 7.0 to 11.0. Except, of course, for GWU still pleading to raise its campus zoning from minimal 3.5 to a marginally higher 4.5. Outsiders find this absurd. Who thinks Foggy Bottom will still be 3.5x5.5 *twenty or forty years hence*? Doesn't it have to grow up too!

While we go on fueling our own embarrassment,...

Many of us from Ward 10 are sick of being conned that the presence of our nation's capital is a drag on city finances, sick of hearing that a third of the city's population is functionally illiterate; sick of demands for post-slavery reparations, taxes on commuters, and higher federal hand-outs; and sick of being embarrassed by reports that our nation's capital is more diseased, more ignorant, more crime-ridden, and more unemployed than most US cities. Up the zoning, fix our capital!

....and keeping our eyes on the wrong ball,.....

Why ever are we debating whether GWU should build a tiny bit more densely around a scarce metro station *over the next twenty years* ; whether it should incorporate *revenue-generating* capacity (for itself and the city) within its property; whether it should *provide more jobs* for city; whether it should *provide more kids a college education* and immersion in the nation's capital; and essentially whether a few hundred sure-to-be-displaced hold-outs can *jeopardize progress* in our nation's capital -- towards far more appropriate urban housing units?

No one is focusing on DC's first-order growth terms: WHY DON'T WE:

- agree when to raise the FAR within six blocks of the Foggy Bottom Metro to 8.0?
- transfer "unused FAR" in some blocks to others willing to use it now?
- resolve the grotesque traffic exchanges at K Street/Whitehurst/I66 et al, and grant air rights for a high-rise "Foggy Bottom 21" residential development looking toward the river?
- grow up to the Watergate and the State Dept instead of down to row house?
- grant GWU a "rising FAR" of 4.5 by 2015, 6.0 by '25 and 8.0 by '50?
- grant GWU air rights above its interior roads to create a real 3-D campus?
- OK a decorative GWU tower as high as Georgetown U's spire:spice up DC featureless skyline?

.....or on DC's first-order embarrassments:

Does this zoning case provide facilities for a Foggy Bottom/GWU Homeless Center, Detox, or Adult Learning Center? How about affordable housing units, and homes for foster kids and retarded adults? Surely DC's better educated residents and kids should help resolve the city's pathetic underclass problems and belly up to the real issues threatening us in the 21st Century.

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