

Testimony of Peter May
Zoning Commission Case # 06-17
October 24, 2006

Good evening Chairman Hood and Members of the Zoning Commission. My name is Peter May and I live at 1017 C Street SE, Washington, DC. I am thrilled to be here tonight to give you a parent's perspective on the School Without Walls. I have been a "Walls" parent for a little more than three years and I hope to be a Walls parent for another five years or so while my younger sons make their way into and through the school.

The Home School Association (HSA) comes here tonight as an independent party – separate from DCPS and GW. However, I will say that feel like I have been working for DCPS for 13 years. Of course I never actually had a job with DCPS, but like so many District parents I have been working on schools since Zack, my oldest son, started pre-K in 1993. I have painted hallways and classrooms, worked in gardens, built furniture, repaired doors, set up a 10-K race course at five in the morning (for at least five years in a row), and I spent literally hundreds of hours on a School Board committee for the 2001 Master Facilities Plan.

As I considered what I would say to the Zoning Commission tonight I started to reminisce about my earliest experience with Walls, namely the dreaded application process. I don't know if this is still the case but at the time Zack applied the Walls application actually included a question for the parents: why do you want your child to attend the School Without Walls. Of course the answer was easy. I wanted my son to go to the School Without Walls because I wanted to go to the School Without Walls!

Think about it – it's an excellent academic program with a focus on humanities, it's located on a college campus, and they use the entire city as a classroom! When I revert to thinking like a parent I can tell you about the top-notch faculty, the college preparation, and the academic performance of its students. Then there is the comforting small-school atmosphere. There are no long hallways crowded with lockers (actually, no lockers) and there are no metal detectors. There is only Mr. Mason, the security guard, who knows my son's name and my name, and when I walk in the door he usually knows where my son is!

Walls is a truly exceptional public high school, not only for what it offers but for what it demands. The teachers and administrators demand that the students take charge of their own

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education. The students must be responsible, self-motivated, and ready to work hard to succeed. The school also demands parental involvement – another chance for us parents to go to work for DCPS. There's the HSA membership and meetings, the phonathon fundraiser, the silent auction, and my favorite, the building committee.

Now let's talk about results. The School Without Walls is one of two "High-Performing" public high schools in the District in terms of "No Child Left Behind". Walls graduates are exceptionally well-prepared for college, not just in terms of academic achievement but also in terms of the self-motivation, self-discipline, and drive to succeed that comes from Walls' unique program. Walls students typically earn college credit either through Advanced Placement courses, which of course many schools offer, or from actual college courses taken at GW or another area university. When my son enters college next fall he could have as many as 10 college credits from GW and perhaps another 7 credits from AP. The reputation of excellence among Walls students has traveled well beyond this area. Mention the District of Columbia's School Without Walls to a college admissions counselor and chances are they'll take an immediate interest in the student.

Finally, we need to talk about what the School Without Walls lacks. There are too few classrooms and many are too small. The science labs are inadequate. The library is tiny and under-supplied. The only restrooms are in the basement. There is no auditorium, no gym, and no cafeteria. And all the facilities are poorly maintained. But, we do have a parking lot, for the moment. After ten years of effort on the part of dozens of parents, DCPS officials, and the George Washington University, we now have the opportunity to parlay that meager asset into a beautiful new high school. We still won't have a gym or a cafeteria, but we will have a better school with more than walls.

It is our understanding that the dormitory that is GW's portion of this proposed PUD fully complies with the existing campus master plan. We ask that the Zoning Commission take swift action to approve the PUD so that we can build the new School Without Walls.