

Testimony of David Lehrman, Commissioner ANC – 2A-01
In Support
The School Without Walls / George Washington University Case # 06-17
Monday, October 30, 2006

When Tip O'Neill said all politics is local I hardly think he was referring to the School without Walls here in downtown DC. But one has only to see the controversy stirred by this project to see how universal his truth was: local projects can stir passion and animus rivaling a presidential or senatorial race. Woe to the politician who ignores local constituents on trash collection, potholes, and yes education.

On October 18, 2006 I saw this first hand. I am one of six Foggy Bottom Advisory Neighborhood Commissioners who voted on whether George Washington University should trade 12 million dollars to build a state of the art school in exchange for Walls property, two tennis courts, which would then be used to house college students in a dormitory. We faced the same issue down the block a few years ago, and now a lovely dorm sits opposite my building helping the university comply with Campus Plan requirements to house 70 percent of its students on campus.

The ANC reaction: Drop dead. (OK, I'm borrowing a Rupert Murdoch inspired NY Post headline from years ago, perhaps more appropriately, you would think the janjaweed had escaped Darfur and were on the march down F St.)

Of course it was all couched so more learnedly. Discussion focused on R2d zoning issues, PUDs, the size of the building of the dormitory, whether high school students would finagle their way into the college dormitory and God forbid perhaps smoke a cigarette on now college territory. The architects and planners addressed every conceivable alphabet soup of zoning variable and exceptions possible, but, alas to no avail. One resident even expended enormous effort to inquire whether the light in the 12 million dollar flagship school would be cut down in the interior by the new design. Never mind that the current model had paint peeling, kids in overcoats and a decrepit plant where parents fight to get their kids in, where the school continues to have the highest SAT scores in downtown DC, and the just retired principal passionately endorsed the long standing commitment of GW to the school.

One question I raised was who were we, to sit in judgment on the hopes and aspirations of double the enrollment and the dreams of parents for their kids? If we ask a congressman whether his kid is in Basra, I think it is fair game to ask if that might affect one's sensitivity to the issue of the Iraq war. So, I asked how many parents were among us on the Commission. The answer: a big fat zero.

Now the fact that I have never lost sleep over a child, tried to aspirate nostrils too young to know how to blow their nose, or sweated over whether my child would make it someday without me, does not disqualify my vote. But I think I have to try harder to understand how a parent who wants their kid to attend the new Walls feels. My vote in support of the project shows I try, but I think I really have to work harder to know what a parent goes through.

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So I asked the Commission, and ask again, how many even of the two married ANC Commissioners had kids. Even there, the answer, a big fat zero.

The discussion was of course of canyon effects with veritable nuclear winters blowing down F street at the size of this humongous dormitory proposed. Never mind that the dormitory opposite the Statesman, at 2020 F street, is now a welcome citizen of the community, and passed every governmental review necessary.

Never mind that our skyline, by law under the size of the Capitol is one of the lowest profiles of any major city. Again and again, the focus of the debate was on intellectually fragile concepts, never defined, such as tipping points (thanks to Malcolm Gladwell), where quality of life in our neighborhood passed the point of no return. Heaven forefend, you would have thought the polar ice caps were in danger.

A few more choice phrases of pseudo-intellectuality and I submit dubious legal merit: that it was impossible to draft the zoning exception (PUD) in such a way that others could not take advantage of its precedential effect. Reality check: the US Supreme Court does this all the time, and we could easily limit this PUD to this specific project.

In short, I do not see the sky falling. But I do fear that the ANC is acting like hemi-semi-Gods without license to do so. Perhaps they see students without a shot at a better DC education as just collateral damage, to the zoning protections involved.

Or perhaps it would not shock you to know that we are guilty, of vote trading, deal making, cliques, hidden agendas, political agendas, and constitute a veritable beehive of activity, much of it hidden from your view. But unhidden is that kids are not getting the education, we on the Commission have been privileged to get. My view: us second, the dreams and hopes of these kids and their parents, first.

Some years ago a pundit made the analogy to how a president should avoid collateral damage rationalizations as he pushed the button to start WW III. The solution. Like a glass shield on a fire alarm, which must be broken first before pulling a fire alarm install the equivalent on the nearest and dearest aide of the President. Attach a cord with a knife to the chest of the closest aide. Implant the codes necessary to spill the world's blood in that aide's heart. Then, you want to start war, stab him, pull out the codes, and splatter your neatly tailored suit, with a symbol of what you were about to do. Then talk about collateral damage.

Well, here's my proposition to my fellow ANC Commissioners. Let's just buy hundreds of muzzles for the kids we've just denied a first rate education. Bring em in-one by one-fit them on their mouths and jaws. Then vote to scotch plans to build Walls a flagship building.

In fact one Commissioner, brought in by two fellow Commissioners as an anti-GW supporter found at every turn no merit to the arguments of his fellow commissioners. He just quit.

My view. You work with the ANC.
You wait. And finally, you hope for a wiser decision.