

Testimony of Elizabeth B. Elliott

October 30, 2006

Z.C. Case No. 06-17: George Washington University (2125-35 F Street, N.W) and D.C. Public Schools—Grant School/School Without Walls, (2130 G Street, N.W.)

As a Foggy Bottom resident, I have lived about two blocks from the Grant School for nearly 30 years. I have spent many happy hours reading, writing or conversing with friends in the small park on F Street, always with the remarkable southern elevation of the Grant School in view. I have also watched the nearly constant use and enjoyment by GWU students of the two outdoor tennis courts located behind the Grant School. The small pleasures we derive, along with the still livable scale of this area that community residents, students, and I enjoy will disappear from our neighborhood if the Commission approves this project.

Starting in January 2001 with my two-year tenure as Chairperson of Advisory Neighborhood Commission 2A, the Historic Preservation Review Board postponed (over community objections) consideration of the landmark application of the Grant School three separate times—until the Spring of this year. The Board finally approved the Grant School landmark application in May and nominated the building for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Simultaneously, the Board fast-tracked what you see before you—a dubious infill proposal crammed into a narrow site—while refusing to address the real driver of this unfortunate solution: a proposed mammoth GWU dormitory project abutting the Grant School on the south.

Even more astounding, was the Board's consideration of a so-called campus historic district that does not even include the Grant School property. In a piece I submitted to the Current newspapers (Attachment A), which was published in a July 26 issue of that paper, I pointed out that the "School Without Walls" program is a concept not a building. And, as evidenced by its proposed expansion, the

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before you, the program has admittedly outgrown the Grant School facility. Even with the proposed addition, the projected increase in the SSW student population to nearly 500 students will generate an incredible amount of wear and tear on the Grant School. Now would the perfect time for the “School Without Walls” program to relocate to a larger and much more appropriate facility, or for a legitimate and appropriately-situated and -scaled addition to be developed behind the current land-marked building. Included in my submission is an Op-Ed piece (See Attachment B) written back in 2002 for the GW Hatchet student paper by a SSW program graduate and a GWU student that, along with my architectural education and my long tenure in the neighborhood, has helped in shape my views about, and understanding of, the Grant School and the SSW program.

With its historic landmark status secure and its eventual listing in the National Register of Historic Places, there will be numerous opportunities for the Grant School to be restored to its original state, and to become a true neighborhood landmark that can serve as a community resource. At the very least, the Commission should not approve the conversion of the Grant School to a “de facto” GWU property in the evenings for use in its private, non-profit business operations. The Grant School is a public building and should be used as a community facility and resource similar in scope to the Sumner School on 17th Street. It would be a perfect location for the ANC, the FBA, and other community groups to hold meetings. The possibilities are endless.

You have a golden opportunity to insist on visionary preservation, restoration, and architectural design in one of the District’s oldest and most historic residential neighborhoods that should not be lost to the insatiable business and development needs of George Washington University.

2/2-page attachments: A and B

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Attachment A/2 pages

Printed in 7-26-06 Viewpoint/Foggy Bottom Current

Submitted as “Losing our history” and retitled “Board needs to re-examine Walls addition”

Much was missing from your story (“Board asks architects to redo Walls addition”—June 28) on the June 22 Historic Preservation Review Board meeting that included consideration of a dubious addition proposal for Foggy Bottom’s now-historically-landmarked Ulysses S. Grant School. The proposed addition has nothing to do with the Grant School building, the history of the property, its now-landmark status nor its place in the history of the greater Foggy Bottom community.

The addition project took flight when a sole-source “land-for-cash” swap between the DC Public Schools and George Washington University was recently forwarded to the DC City Council and approved in record time, all with absolutely no community participation or input. Michael Thomas, ANC 2A-02 Commissioner, pointed out at the hearing that, once again, the insatiable need of GWU is driving the Grant School addition—part of a 3 million square foot plus tsunami of GWU development requests that has come over the Zoning Commission transom in the last two months.

Commissioner Thomas also noted that—after stonewalling the Foggy Bottom community for over five years on the January 2001 landmark application of the Grant School—the HPRB is now fast-tracking its approval of the addition concept so the project can move quickly to the Zoning Commission. GWU and the DC Public Schools have already filed a joint application at the ZC for a Planned Unit Development—a zoning tool that is not appropriate for use in conjunction with campus plans and university development. In fact, Chapter 24 of our Zoning Regulations prohibits the use of the PUD process to “circumvent the intent and purposes of the Zoning Regulations,” which is exactly what is going on here.

The PUD application includes the addition and an enormous, out-of-scale GWU dormitory abutting and looming over the Grant School property from the south as well as the elimination of the well-used GWU tennis courts and any open space remaining on the square. Most troubling, this joint project is abutting GWU’s imaginary southern development boundary and is in the midst of a low scale, four-block stretch of residential F Street, where the university is already housing nearly 4,000 of its transient undergraduate students. This has created all of the attendant objectionable affects imaginable on the non-university population.

As this paper has reported, GWU has been on an expansion tear over the last seven years, flooding Foggy Bottom with 20,000-plus students and concentrating huge populations of students cheek-by-jowl with the remaining non-university residential properties and population. GWU has added millions of square feet of intense university use to our community, and created a series of infill projects, many of them occupying public space and/or abutting GW’s property lines for individual buildings. This forces intense and objectionable university use—including tens of thousands of faculty, staff, students and visitors—into public and non-university private space in all the squares GW now dominates.

These infill projects also create the illusion that everything—including public sidewalks and non-GWU private property—located here is university-owned and operated, and that we residents are interlopers in our own neighborhood. In a related development, a week after the Grant School travesty, the HPRB conducted an “information presentation” on a proposed Master Plan Review for the George Washington University/Foggy Bottom Campus Historic Preservation Plan. In its report on this pending application for a GWU campus historic

district—which coincidentally does not include the Grant School property—the Office of Planning describes portions of Foggy Bottom “along 20th, 21st, 22nd, F and G Streets, which retain the rich visual character of a historic residential neighborhood.” Perversely, only in our city would officials allow the permanent residents and the Foggy Bottom neighborhood to *become* history—driven out by a private, non-profit educational institution using those homes and the larger community as a stage set and a lure for its never-ending business activities.

When I attempted to convey to the HPRB that the Grant School addition—crammed into a narrow space east of the building with plans to add 100+ new students—was nothing more than an infill project, I was dismissed. (And the GWU plans to drop another 500+ undergraduate students into the planned dorm behind the Grant School weren’t even allowed on the radar screen.) The Board clearly doesn’t understand that the School Without Walls program is a concept not a building, and, as evidenced by the DCPS’s expansion proposal, has admittedly outgrown the Grant School facility. The solution to that problem should be a new location for the program, not a trashing of Foggy Bottom’s historic resources nor any further accommodation of GWU’s destructive growth in the heart of our historic community.

Now is the opportune time for a renovated Grant School building to become a true neighborhood landmark that can serve as a community facility for our Foggy Bottom residents. It is time to stop selling, giving or trading away our neighborhood’s public resources and to begin the restoration of the torn fabric of our residential community—a purpose that correctly aligns with the vision and mission of historic preservation.

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Attachment B/2 pages

GW Hatchet - Opinions

Issue: 09/26/02

Op-Ed: Walls do not define debate

By Will Alexander

People often look at my former high school, the School Without Walls, and point out the things that it does not have. It does not have a gymnasium. There is no cafeteria. Some unfamiliar with the school even believe the building lacks physical walls. The debate over what to do with the aging facility is nothing new.

When I entered as a freshman back in 1996 the issue was just as hotly contested as it is now. The difference now is that there are new players in the game. Under former principal Emily Crandall, the idea of tearing down my beloved high school was staunchly opposed by students and faculty alike. We thrived as a community in that old building. Enrollment was not as high then. There was more space to comfortably enjoy a lunch that you brought from home or purchased from a nearby vendor, so there was no pressing need for a cafeteria. And although we did not have a gymnasium, our girls' volleyball team won the city championship in 1998 and our track team appeared in every city championship since its inception in 1996.

People have lost sight of the ideology that was behind the founding of SSW. It was modeled after a program begun in Philadelphia during the early 1970s. Students were granted a greater sense of autonomy in choosing the direction of their academic interests than commonly seen in conventional high schools. It did not matter that our facility was not equipped with a science lab. Students were entrusted with the responsibility to meet their biology teacher at the U.S. Botanical Gardens or to meet their physics teacher at the University of the District of Columbia. We went out into the community and networked and created internship opportunities that accounted for credit toward graduation. Under this ideology, it was never intended for any one building to meet the needs of a student – the program needed students who were willing to go beyond traditional expectations of high school students who were confined within the "walls" of some mundane building.

Does the program work? The SSW has consistently yielded successful graduating classes with a college acceptance rate hovering around 95 percent, among the highest in the area. If you look amongst your classmates, chances are you will either find a Walls alumnus, or a student currently attending SSW and also enrolled in college classes at GW.

The fight for preserving SSW began to lose momentum once certain mandates were decreed downtown by the superintendent of schools. There began a push to consolidate area high schools with low enrollment and to move away from smaller programs such as SSW. Students in the District lost McKinley Tech, which was the city's only technical high school at the time. No school replaced it. Developers were able to acquire the property.

Under these mandates, SSW was required to increase its enrollment from a comfortable 250 students to its current numbers, which seem to have the school bursting at the seams. The added burden has put a strain on the facilities as well as on those who are entrusted to maintain them. Many of the teachers who so profoundly shaped my personal growth are no longer there to do the same for future generations. SSW is not a "neighborhood school" in the sense that it doesn't serve a particular population of students who live within a designated boundary zone, as is the case with other schools. Budget concerns are perhaps the only reason why so many students are enrolled; in order to satisfy a weighted student formula dictating how much funding the school receives. I particularly oppose the notion of GW coming to the rescue of students in "inadequate facilities." GW is only a player in this because the situation will prove advantageous to its ends of expanding its own facilities. This is in no way about the SSW students. The University wants to build a dorm there to house more GW students who will pay more inflated housing costs. It is the acquisition of property that motivates GW in this instance. I am disgusted to see it being masked as a philanthropic gesture to benefit the "disadvantaged students" of the city.

This is not a win-win situation. There is no trade-off. It is a buy-out, plain and simple. No one was there the winter our boiler stopped working and we wore winter coats in class. The boiler got fixed in a few weeks and things went on as normal. But people on the outside can point to such shortcomings, as well as the current enrollment predicament as reason to tear down the building.

They fail to realize that what is being torn down is not just a decrepit building; it is a legacy of students who have gone against all odds and overcome adversity to achieve the heights they have reached in life. One day, there may be a building with the name "School Without Walls" embossed on some engraved plaque above the door, but that building will never hold true to the founding principles that define what it means to come from the School Without Walls.

-The writer, a junior majoring in mechanical engineering, is a graduate of the School Without Walls.