

Square 54 Case 06-27

Madame Chair and Members of Board:

My name is David Lehrman. I have lived in Foggy Bottom for 14 years. This January begins my third term on the ANC for Single Member District 2A01. The issue of Square 54 and its commercial use is one of vital interest to our ANC. My view is a minority one on the ANC and does not represent the majority of our members.

I would like to start with a personal anecdote if I may. My career with the Federal Government placed me in the DOT Nassif Building at 7th and D ST., SW, ultimately diagnosed as a "sick building." People were chronically ill with asthma, bronchitis, and a host of respiratory problems. Built in the 1960s, it was to quote Ed McMahon for those of us who remember his Karnak the Magician routine with the then Johnny Carson show, "hermetically sealed tighter than a Funk and Wagnell's mayonnaise jar. It got so bad we emptied the building for its first-ever systemic cleaning.

I still remember the daily briefings on what we had been breathing: fumes from industrial strength carpet glue, toner and printer and computer emissions, cleaning fluids used at night. Stachabotros, aspergillium, and a host of scary viruses and bacteria. One day workmen took down a false wall by the gym. A foot deep of fungus greeted them. One man fell over in a dead faint.

Lets fast forward thirty years. The building now proposed will boast at least a sixteen, a very high green rating for a commercial building. Windows will open. A veritable Amazonian rain forest will thrive atop hundreds of thousands of soil bearing plants and trees bringing needed carbon dioxide absorption and oxygen production adding to the air quality of downtown DC.

The Washington Post just last week described how our own City Council is considering legislation to require all significant buildings comply with such a green requirement. A builder adds as much as 11% to the cost of the building to do so.

Imagine how better off the city would be if we had been doing this for the last thirty years. And consider how much more we can do in developing such a concept.

My argument in support of this project is very simple: I live in a community that has a range of opinions on GW. I ask of this project, does it do more good than harm.

Finding yes, I next ask how much good. If you are lukewarm, perhaps 51% good. If you are Lou Katz, you say 100%. My finding is about 88% more good than bad.

But the opponents take a different tack. Not only is the university more bad than good. Not only do they oppose each and every GW proposal in toto. They actually see the university as the devil incarnate. A villain to be opposed at every turn.

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And armed with an ally in the Foggy Bottom Association they bring a war chest of 2 million dollars to litigate any GW initiative. It was never the intention of the founders of home rule in 1973, that an ANC become a Kangaroo Court paying for lawyers to confound every initiative of GW.

You know the old story of the poor lawyer in a small town. New lawyer moves to town. Now they both get rich. Every body is suing everybody.

You might call me an anti litigation lawyer. What results in a lawsuit: facts get polarized. Sides insist on "my way or the highway." As the great Statesman Abba Eban said one never misses an opportunity to miss an opportunity. And the price is common sense

Years ago my cousin was a camp counselor. He hit a kid on a dirt road driving a bike. Result: hurled the kid into the back seat, drove him in 3 minutes to the hospital and saved his life. Now what do we see: call for the paramedics. Don't dare move the kid. And if you are a physician don't dare intervene lest your deep pockets insurance company become a target for a 1800, Call-a-lawyer. Oh—and by the way—the kid dies, because common sense became a casualty of the litigiousness.

We have only to look at tonight's testimony. What I say is scrutinized for how it will look on an appellate judge's desk as cross examination testimony. Even children are subject to treatment like criminals: do you own a car, was my favorite at the last hearing here. Kids come to college. Next thing you know they are being treated like Jeffrey Dahmer.

Contrast that with the Chevy Chase or Dupont Circle ANCs. There dedicated long time residents collegially work to add quality to each and every project before it. That I believe is the gold standard that I hope for in my ANC.

In conclusion, can we do more. Absolutely. I hope this body and the City Council will push the building trades so it's not 40 years for the next generation of buildings. Why can't we be so proactive and aggressive that we demand 15 years for the next breakthroughs.

Yes, this building will add 12 million dollars to the tax rolls. Yes it will filter and purify air. But we can ask for more. Our public responsibility requires that we ask more.

And you know what the most dangerous animal on Earth is: an informed, energetic ANC or Public Body. Because when 6 smart professionals start nosing around in every presumption and assumption of a building, study the floor plan, assess the energy requirements, speak truth to power, large projects get better.

In fact, that's what I have seen here. GW has steadily improved its plan for this site. The feedback loop with community input has made a better project. Now, instead of street blockage for deliveries below ground loading docks will get even tractor trailers off the street and inside to deliver goods.

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But it's just the beginning. Now we ask for better, safer, more fuel efficient more responsive buildings. We never stop. That's our job.

But for now, what you see not only has my endorsement. It's the best building proposed for the area. Sure the University will make money. And earn the jealousy of small colleges struggling to survive. No wonder the Board and the Mayor and the city council will get behind.

But don't listen to me on this. Just listen to my opponents. If they find good and bad, they might have something there. But if they demonize and vilify and simplify this project for a commercial Square 54 then I think they are on very fragile intellectual ground.

I know I support this project. But more important, the facts, logic, and yes, just basic common sense militate that it be built.