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2009 FEB 18 AM 10:32

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February 13, 2009

Mr. Anthony Hood, Chair
District of Columbia Zoning Commission
441 4th Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20001

Re: Case No. 08-15

Dear Mr. Hood,

We are writing in opposition to the zoning change and development planned by the holding company that owns the Giant food and drug stores at Wisconsin and Newark, NW. We live on 34th Place, and are regular patrons of both existing stores, and we believe the proposal is inappropriate and vastly out scale for Cleveland Park. As such, it would seriously affect the quality of life in our neighborhood, which is a quiet city treasure.

At a neighborhood meeting several months ago, the presenters for Giant were asked if they would be willing to share any of their pro forma projections that had been prepared for the project. Of course they declined, citing proprietary considerations, but that left us to do a projection of our own. Currently the pharmacy and food store occupy a combined total of approximately 23,000 square feet. The proposed new Giant store would be approximately 56,000 square feet or roughly double the space dedicated to the two existing stores. It is safe to say that a for-profit company would not plan to put up a complex of buildings costing tens of millions of dollars in order to gross less revenue per square foot than do the existing facilities. That means, excluding all of the other commercial development planned (totaling 137,000 square feet, we believe), the traffic and congestion in and through our neighborhood would be, at an absolute minimum, twice what it is now if the vehicle and foot traffic per square foot stayed exactly the same.

But it is far more likely the developers of the project hope to increase the income per square foot substantially for not only the Giant store but the other 81,000 commercial square feet as well. In other words, for the project to be successful there will have to much more than double the current vehicular and pedestrian traffic to and from the proposed complex.

The existing stores serve the immediate neighborhood adequately. In our experience, it is rare to have to wait more than a few minutes in line at the grocery store, and it is reasonably well stocked for a neighborhood store. The same is true of the pharmacy, with the exception that we have occasionally had to wait for 15 minutes or more at the prescription counter, and the stock of pharmaceuticals is limited. However,

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issues with the quality of stock and service at these stores (and we agree there are some) are management issues, not a size issue.

We have asked ourselves what is the worst possible outcome if the neighborhood and the developers don't agree. It seems there could be two. We think the worst would be that the developers could roll over the neighborhood and construct a regional behemoth that would make our streets as busy as those around the existing Giant development in Bethesda.

A second undesirable outcome would be if the Dutch holding company that owns Giant decided that working within existing zoning wasn't worth the effort and it decided not to continue operating either store, with neither being reopened as a grocery or pharmacy by somebody else. If that happened, there are two Safeways (one of which is slated for renovation) and two Whole Foods stores within a mile along Wisconsin Avenue. There are two groceries on Connecticut Avenue – DGS and Magruder's (not even counting the Yes! store), within half a mile. There are two pharmacies – at Tenley and Connecticut Avenue. There is bus service along Wisconsin Avenue and Porter street, so that even those without cars would not be critically inconvenienced. Moreover, it seems highly unlikely that if Giant pulled out, others would not come in with a neighborhood-sized store in the existing facilities, perhaps with renovation.

On the other hand, the best possible outcome would be if the developers scaled down the project to work within existing zoning and truly serve the neighborhood.

From the beginning, Cleveland Park has been a bucolic neighborhood, near downtown but not of it. In that respect it is unique, and could hold its own in comparison to the better neighborhoods of Paris, London, Vienna or any of a host of world capitals. It is not downtown Bethesda, where a corridor of high rises is surrounded by automobile dealers and light commercial development that has become a regional draw and a traffic mess. We can see no reason to give up on preserving the special, unhurried character of Cleveland Park to accommodate developers seeking more profitable hubs.

For all of these reasons we strongly oppose any zoning change and would ask that any discussions with outside developers be based on existing zoning.

Sincerely,

Rufus King, III


Barbara Stevens

