

**Oral Testimony of Jeffrey S. Davis
on behalf of Advocates for Wisconsin Avenue Renewal
in favor of the Stop & Shop/Giant PUD Application
before the District of Columbia Zoning Commission
April 23, 2009**

Chairman Hood and Commissioners, thank you for this opportunity to support the Application for Planned Unit Development of the Friendship Shopping Center. I speak tonight on behalf of AWARE - Advocates for Wisconsin Avenue Renewal. AWARE has 175 members in and around Cleveland Park and over 400 other community members have signed AWARE's petition urging rapid approval of Giant's PUD Application. Many AWARE members live within 200 feet of the project, many more - like myself - live within walking distance, and still others live within Ward 3 and access the services currently offered at the site.

AWARE's message is simple: AWARE members and the wider community want proposed development approved as quickly as possible. It's easy to see why. The proposal will transform the outmoded grocery store and struggling commercial strip along Wisconsin Avenue, provide valuable neighborhood services, increase DC's tax-base, and promote a vibrant, walkable neighborhood for thousands of current and future community residents. Many of us already walk to the current site, to enjoy the great restaurants, buy toys with our kids at Sullivans, fill prescriptions at the pharmacy, and yes, buy a bag or two of groceries.

Now, I can't match Mary Cheh's eloquence, but based on my work in the community on this limited issue, I can repeat with confidence her message: the community strongly supports rapid approval of the PUD Application. The pent-up desire for this project and the frustration at its continued delay are palpable throughout the neighborhood. As the Council Member said "the community yearns for this project and has yearned for it for years." One of AWARE's public events was a five-hour information session held outside the current Giant store. The two most common questions asked were: What is taking so long to rebuild this Giant? and How much longer do we have to wait?

The widespread support for approval of this project is reflected in the unanimous vote of ANC3C, support from the governing bodies of the Woodley Park and Massachusetts Avenue Heights Community Associations, support from the Chesterfield Co-op - located across the street from the project - and McLean Gardens - which borders the project, and support from Mary Cheh, DC Councilmember for Ward 3, and over 50 others who wrote letters in the record.

Now, no project is perfect and there are, of course, critics of this project. While their criticism had a legitimate basis at one point in time, that time has passed. The current proposal has been substantially improved through the efforts of the ANC, the DC Office of Planning, and the DC Department of Transportation (DDOT) which have addressed community concerns about parking, traffic and loading. The ANC made significant efforts to improve the application by adding conditions on these issues to its resolution supporting the application. The Applicant also has agreed to address these issues by modifying the location of the loading docks, funding noise studies and dampening measures, funding an operations management plan, funding traffic studies, and funding traffic calming measures both before and after construction is complete. Finally, DDOT listened carefully to the neighborhood and attempted to address their concerns by making numerous recommendations in its study.

Despite these efforts to address traffic, loading, and parking issues, a small group of community members refuses to be placated. And make no mistake, it is a small group. In an informal but informative poll on the Cleveland Park listserve – one of the most active listserves in DC – 94 percent of respondents approve of the project: out of 265 respondents, 205 said just build it already without conditions, 44 said approve it with some conditions, and just 16 or 6 percent opposed the project. This is the same small minority of which Roger Lewis said in his Washington Post article last Saturday: “the minority can be organized and outspoken while redevelopment supporters remain silent.” Well, AWARE is here to represent those silent supporters who are the overwhelming majority in this case.

The organized and outspoken critics give no credit to efforts to address their concerns and no deference to DDOT, the Office of Planning, or this Commission to apply its expertise properly. In their view, as they have shown in the last two hearings, the critics consider themselves to be experts on all Zoning matters: the Comprehensive Plan, traffic patterns, parking, finance, noise, topography, construction, and more. AWARE wants you to know that these critics are relatively few in numbers, and they do not speak for the wider community in this matter.

You have heard and will continue to hear in this proceeding from some who live near the project and oppose it – such as the Idaho, Macomb, and Ordway neighbors who have special concerns about the construction near their homes. We sympathize with them. We trust you will weigh their unique concerns, but also consider the mitigation that has already been offered to them and understand that their circumstances are idiosyncratic and are not shared equally by the wider community.

Finally, you will hear from two groups with overlapping members and overlapping issues – the Cleveland Park Citizens Association (CPCA) and the Wisconsin Newark Neighbors Coalition. CPCA will no doubt tell you that they support a new Giant and that they have worked tirelessly for years towards that goal. While CPCA contributed to the original Giant project in 2002, it has been years since CPCA was a positive force in this debate. In fact, while CPCA claims to represent all of Cleveland Park, only 32 votes were cast in favor of its resolution opposing the PUD resolution, as few as 16 households out of several thousand. CPCA is now badly out of step with the prevailing sentiment in our community.

Similarly, to the best of my knowledge based on its application for party status, the Newark group consists of just six households, many of whom are also believed to be members of CPCA. They have submitted a petition, but that petition is flawed. First, it was signed before Giant issued its final proposal and before OP, DDOT and the ANC worked to improve the proposal. It also double counts almost two dozen individuals that have applied for party status with other groups. This small group has consistently sought a disproportionately loud voice in our community and attempted to elevate their voices and their interests over their neighbors'. We urge you to give this group's views only their due weight and no more.

I did not set out to form AWARE or any group to publicly advocate on this issue. My involvement started when it became clear to me that a small but vocal minority of neighbors was attempting to control the outcome of Giant's PUD Application and that a larger but silent majority was being ignored. When I expressed this view on the neighborhood listserve I was flooded with emails urging that a group be formed to represent that silent majority. Ordinarily, I would do what most people in the silent majority do, which is to get on with my busy life and hope that someone else would step up and lead. Inspired by a civics lesson from my 10-year old daughter about our good fortune to live in the capitol of the greatest democracy on earth, I decided that the time had come for the silent majority in our small community to have a voice.

On behalf of AWARE, I ask that you endorse the overwhelming view of the community by promptly approving the PUD Application.

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The Washington Post

Standing in the Way of Smart Urban Development

By Roger K. Lewis
Saturday, April 18, 2009

Some residents of the District cling to a suburban mentality. This mentality, coupled with government mismanagement, can obstruct desirable redevelopment. For the city to evolve, residents' attitudes and government performance must change.

Project opponents typically voice anxiety about increased density, shifting uses and populations, worsening traffic, and the prospect that new buildings won't be in harmony with the existing context. Some mistrust government and believe that only the interests of developers are being served. Others simply fear change. Despite compelling evidence of the merits of a redevelopment project, opponents rarely change their minds.

They may represent a minority of people affected by redevelopment, but that minority can be organized and outspoken while redevelopment supporters remain silent. Hearing little from the majority and pressured by the minority, the city can make bad decisions.

Two controversial D.C. projects, both on Wisconsin Avenue NW, illustrate redevelopment challenges: the Giant shopping-center site at Newark Street, adjacent to Cleveland Park, and the Tenleytown branch library site at Albemarle Street, adjacent to the Janney elementary school and across the street from the Tenleytown Metro station.

The owner of the Giant site proposes more uses, including apartments, and more density than underlying zoning allows. The D.C. Office of Planning and the District Department of Transportation, as well as Council member Mary M. Cheh (D-Ward 3), support the proposal.

Zoning Commission hearings have been contentious and legalistic. But the real source of contention is not legalistic. Rather, it is the long-standing preference and nostalgic desire of some nearby residents for the Giant site to remain what it's always been: low-density commercial.

The property has been fallow long enough. In the interest of "smart growth," the Zoning Commission should approve the rezoning and enable overdue redevelopment.

With demolition of the old Tenleytown library, intense redevelopment of this prominent D.C. property next to a Metro station made sense. Accordingly, the District envisioned a dense, mixed-use complex encompassing a new library and multi-family, mid-rise housing. Changes would include the adjacent school and playgrounds.

Pursuing a private-public strategy, the city invited developers to submit proposals, with residents as well as public officials participating in the planning and evaluation.

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Unfortunately, controversy ensued. Disagreements arose about the quality and feasibility of the proposals, functional and aesthetic compromises, and even the private-public-partnership concept. The process fell apart.

After fumbling the ball, the city punted. Defaulting to the suburban strategy, it now intends to build only a free-standing, two-story branch library. Gone is the chance to do the right thing -- transit-oriented development -- on this unique, publicly owned site.

The missed Tenleytown opportunity shows that developer competitions are not always the right approach for complicated civic projects. And it shows once again that the city needs a competent, proactive agency that can independently finance and implement redevelopment of public property.

Much suburban fabric is relatively static. Much urban fabric is relatively dynamic, changing as circumstances change. Living in cities means accepting and even embracing change. Living in America's capital city should be no exception.

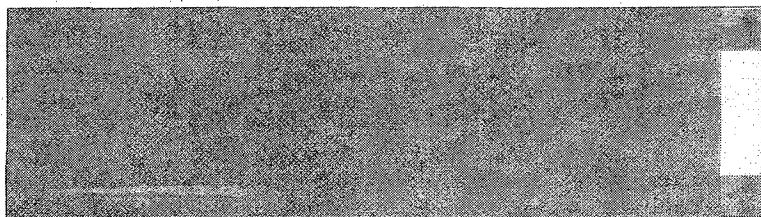
Roger K. Lewis is a practicing architect and a professor emeritus of architecture at the University of Maryland.

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