

Testimony of Philip Blair jr.

(Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner for ANC 5A10)

Before the Zoning Commission for the District of Columbia

In the Matter of Cases No. 08-24 and No. 08-24A/04-24

(Catholic University of America South Campus

Planned Unit Development)

Monday, 5 October, 2009

I serve as elected Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner for Single Member District 5A10. Since long before my election, I have participated actively and energetically with a large group of neighbors in the public process during the Williams and Fenty administrations. This work culminated in the Brookland-Catholic University Metro Small Area Plan. I am here tonight to urge rejection of Catholic University of America Planned Unit Development proposal as it now stands, because it is contradictory to that SAP.

Opposition, Generally:

Colleagues and neighbors of mine will oppose a number of aspects of this proposal. I endorse their testimony, and I am especially appalled by:

- ☐ A chump-change amenities package that was negotiated with the least possible input from the full affected community, and not even any notice to the immediately affected Advisory Neighborhood Commissioners of 5A.
- ☐ The "Arts Alley" component, a predictable failure waiting to happen, based on the history of existing arts-based failures along the Rhode Island Avenue-Route 1 corridor and competition with similar dubious arts components

elsewhere, such as the Cafritz development at Fort Totten Station.

- ☐ The inexplicable failure of Catholic University: it does not base the arts component on its strengths—performance programs in music, the musical theater, and drama—programs whose wonderful performances are now barely attended because of inadequate and badly sited performance spaces along Harewood Road. (A serious performance arts focus would also build bridges with such community treasures as the Kirov School and Dance Place, but alas....)
- ☐ No clear promise to permit the development of a flourishing tree canopy and green space by undergrounding utilities.
- ☐ Severe problems in the massing and siting of major construction.
- ☐ The lack of quality and durability of apparent wood frame construction for 5- and 6-storey buildings.
- ☐ A near total lack of explanation or commitment from the University, the developer, and the District itself on financial responsibilities and commitments for vital components of the plan, such as the undergrounding of utilities and accessibility improvements for Americans

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(and others) with Disabilities at the western entrance to the Metro Station, improvements that must be made in a Metro station that serves the District's largest concentration of medical facilities.

I will concentrate my testimony on two distinct and very closely related issues: the street grid and traffic management.

Connectivity and the Street Grid:

In these two closely related issues, the proposed PUD flatly contradicts core elements of the Small Area Plan passed by Council and signed by the Mayor at the beginning of this year. This SAP was the product of an unusually (if not uniquely) rich and productive process of community input. I and my colleagues on ANC 5A unanimously opposed the SAP in the first months of this year. It did not in our opinion fully deal with certain important issues. But we did recognize and state that it incorporated many important forward steps in insuring a well-designed and livable community.

So, I find myself here tonight defending the important portions of the SAP that call for greater connectivity of streets and the reestablishment of connections lost over the years from the original extensions of the L'Enfant and McMillan plans into the new northern portions of the city.

The deficiencies of this PUD in defiance of the Small Area Plan are so fundamental and so serious that, in my opinion, they force Zoning to reject the PUD as now written.

An early and repeated insistence from the community was that the SAP should link separated parts of the community back together.

East-West Connectivity:

The chief barrier to an integrated community is formed by the Red Line, which can only be

crossed at four choke-points in the extended area (Franklin, Monroe, and Taylor Streets and Michigan Avenue).

The Drew Bridge carries Michigan Avenue over the Red Line. The bridge is a very serious problem. It was built as a projected part of a freeway that never happened, and it is a blight on the community as it now stands. Moreover it is in dangerous disrepair, a serious threat : to pedestrians and bicyclists especially. The only non-street pedestrian or bicycle connection over the Red Line is under it at the Metro station, if the station is open.

The Red Line and the Drew Bridge are a wall between east and west, and between the University and the Brookland community. It fosters a counterproductive "us versus them" mentality on both sides of the divide, and makes for a dangerous and ugly part of our small town.

The community had hoped for a rather drastic reconfiguration of the Metro station, but even without that reconfiguration, there are still measures to mitigate and others to exacerbate the problems caused by bad east-west connectivity. The Catholic University PUD proposal offers almost no mitigation while adding serious new problems to the mix.

North South Connectivity

An equally serious north-south connectivity issue is caused by the Catholic University Campus and Michigan Avenue. As the University acknowledges, it is the largest contiguous academic campus in the city. To go between north and south, the options are (first, from the west) North Capitol Street and the Irving Street approach to North Capitol (with already failing intersections and a plethora of proposed developments coming: the McMillan Park tract, the Washington Hospital Center, Irving Street, and the area of the Armed Forces Retirement Home); then the 4th Street, NE-Harewood Road corridor;

and then 10th and 12th Streets and the numbered streets in residential neighborhoods on the city grid to the east.

The missing connection, which existed not many years ago as a usable part of the grid, is the 8th Street-Brookland Avenue corridor. (Our old Brookland Avenue is now called John McCormack Road.)

That corridor is now broken physically between Monroe Streets and Michigan Avenue, and in practice by traffic management regulations which do not permit travel south on John McCormack Road to Michigan Avenue without a most awkward detour through campus; the same regulations block McCormack Road northbound from Michigan Avenue.

Catholic University has thereby effectively privatized a vital part of the public street grid (and a federal highway to boot) and is using it as their access road only. I think that this is both a selfish and short-sighted policy on Catholic University's part: I can imagine no reason for the District of Columbia to be their accomplices in this destructiveness.

The long and spirited public discussion which produced the Small Area Plan unanimously endorsed the idea that connectivity was necessary and should be reestablished wherever possible, north-south and east-west, and socially as well. In fact the community proposed a number of exiting and visionary proposals to address connectivity issue.

Turn to the Small Area Plan. It must be read with both the text and the illustrations in mind; if anything, the illustrations reflect more care and careful drafting than the text.

The core statement is in the "Transportation, Connectivity, Walkability" subsection beginning on p. 39:

The Small Area Plan proposes strategies to create better and more efficient pedestrian and vehicular connectivity and linkages to neighborhood destinations. Reestablishing the fabric and grid of the streets and blocks whenever possible will reconnect the neighborhood by allowing for better, [*sic*] circulation around the neighborhood and better pedestrian connectivity.

Most explicitly and concisely of all, the Executive Summary (page 3) reads (*italics provided*):

Street realignments include 8th Street at Michigan Avenue, *8th Street with John McCormack Road at Michigan Avenue*, and Monroe Street at Michigan Avenue.

The draft plan supports connectivity between Monroe Street, Michigan Avenue, and 8th Street. That connectivity can take many forms. *The conceptual plan shows an extended 8th Street that connects Monroe and Michigan Avenue*; an extended 8th Street could accommodate vehicles or be limited to pedestrians. The connection could also be made via the Metropolitan Branch Trail.

The "or be limited to pedestrians" language is in stark contrast to all other references to connectivity. This language has its roots in an effort to preserve the possibility of decking options at the Metro station, but not as a viable alternative to a McCormack-8th Street vehicular connection in the absence of decking. Reference to the Metropolitan Branch Trail is carried in from a discussion on bicycle circulation, and was considered additional connectivity, but not alternative connectivity in replacement of the real vehicular connectivity discussed everywhere else.

To be fair to Catholic University, the reestablishment of the grid in the Monroe to Michigan area is very complicated, possibly very expensive, and rightfully a responsibility more of the District and the Federal Highway Administration, rather than of the University and the developer. It might involve tunneling under the current configuration of Michigan Avenue instead of rising to meet it at grade. The whole area is a problem not yet addressed, even though the Drew Bridge has already reached the end of its usable life (it was designed as a temporary expedient anyway), and even though the bridge increasingly presents a danger to the persons using it or passing near it. A redesign and reconstruction can not long be delayed.

Maybe the best we can hope for if the District and the FHA do not soon rise to the occasion would be development that at least does not preclude later reconnection.

But the current PUD, in this aspect as in so many others, does preclude redoing it right in, probably, the next 50-year timespan or longer.

All illustrations of the many in the plan show McCormack Road reconnected to 8th Street as a through street, for vehicular and foot traffic, except for the rejected Bus Option variants on pages A2, A5, and A6 (Figures A4-A5 and A8-A11). Even those drawings clearly show McCormack reconnected to Michigan Avenue.

Shuttle Busses

A very important component of traffic mitigation in the SAP area is and will be the use of shuttle busses to carry passengers between the Metro station and employment and activity centers to the west (the Washington Hospital Center, the Basilica, Trinity University and future possible development at the Mariani hotel site, the Armed Forces Retirement Home, the McMillan Park sites, and the Cloverleaf) and to the east

(Providence Hospital, the Hospital for Sick Children, and other centers).

A clear consensus in the community discussions of the SAP was that shuttle traffic to the east of the Red Line should stay there, and traffic to the West of the Red Line should not continue to cross over the tracks.

Currently significant time and almost a half-mile of distance per trip is wasted by shuttle traffic to and from the west that goes through a torturous 180-degree left turn after crossing the Drew Bridge needlessly. The PUD references a possible shuttle stop on 7th Street between Michigan and Monroe. This will never be a real option because—from the point of view of the shuttle rider—he is forced to walk a block more, cross under the bridge, and do a hairpin turn to get back into Metro from the western entrance. All this in the rain or snow, perhaps. Contrast this to the very short walk a shuttle rider now takes from the drop-off at the eastern side of the bridge to the eastern entrance, especially to the elevator.

I am not fooled: the drop-off on 7th is never going to happen. This is yet another reason to insist on vehicular connectivity, if only for shuttle busses, along a rebuilt 8th Street between Monroe and Michigan.

Public Confidence in Government:

There is a final reason that you should demand a reconceptualization of the proposed Catholic University PUD.

The public process for the Small Area Plan was only as productive and energetic as it was because at the beginning of the Fenty Administration, and at the beginning of the tenure of Harriet Tregoning as director of the Office of Planning, it seemed that a new day had dawned in which citizens actually would have a say, rather than waiting passively to be bulldozed by the developers.

When citizens come to feel that they have been suckered, confidence in all aspects of government is destroyed. There were doom-sayers who predicted that the Small Area Plan process was a trap. All concessions to developers would be written in stone; all concessions to the community would be written on water. Developers and their lawyers know how to work behind the scenes; we are chumps to think we have a say.

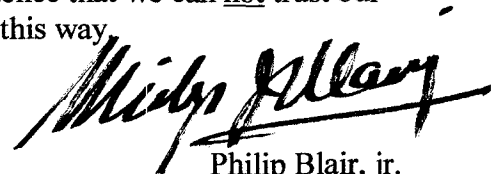
The Catholic University PUD is only the second to come to the zoning approval process, after the smaller St. Paul's College PUD. The St. Paul's College PUD (which you approved) is an attack on the grid and on connectivity in one very large respect: it does not take advantage of its natural possible 4th Street frontage; instead it throws almost all of its traffic burden back to the east, into the area between St. Paul's College and the Red Line that is the area most impacted by this Catholic University PUD. The only light at the end of this tunnel, greater connectivity centered on the Michigan-Monroe-Red Line triangle, is snuffed out by this Catholic University PUD.

If these two PUDs establish a pattern, citizen reaction against follow-on PUDs for the Metro station property between the tracks and 10th Street, or for the Jamal properties north of the Drew Bridge, or for the Brooks Tavern site (to cite the next three in line, most probably) will be immediate, very negative,

and based on the resentments caused by defective PUDs at St. Paul's College and Catholic University. The nay-sayers will be vindicated; we will enter yet another deeper cycle of public cynicism and alienation from our government.

The Zoning Board cannot be expected to tidy up the world-view of citizens of the District of Columbia generally, but please do not tar yourselves with your own brush by failing to defend the real accomplishments of the Brookland-Catholic University Small Area Plan.

I, as an ANC Commissioner trying honestly to defend the interests of my constituents on, say, Rhode Island Avenue, cannot in good conscience say to them that they should give a proposed Rhode Island Avenue Small Area Plan the benefit of the doubt and count on the good faith of their city officials if we all see at the Brookland-Catholic University Small Area clear evidence that we can not trust our government in this way.



Philip Blair, jr.
1518 Kearney Street, NE
Washington, DC 20017
202-526-8821
blair-rowan@starpower.net

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