



July 30, 2009

District of Columbia Zoning Commission
441 4th Street, NW
Suite 210 South
Washington, DC 20001

Dear Commissioners:

On behalf of the Arboretum Neighborhood Association, I thank you for the opportunity to testify at this public hearing and express the support of our community for the Arbor Place development (Case 09-06: Abdo New York LLC).

The Arboretum Neighborhood is a vibrant community that sits adjacent the National Arboretum in Advisory Neighborhood Commission Single Member District 5B09. The site of the proposed development is directly across Bladensburg Road. As the site is essentially in the Arboretum neighborhood, ours will be the most directly impacted community.

On June 23rd our community held a meeting where the developer—Abdo Development—presented its revised plans for this project and took questions from the community. The meeting was very well attended and there was a vibrant discussion and exchange of ideas. In the end, a motion was proposed, seconded and unanimously approved to express the community's support for this project as presented.

Our community feels very strongly that this development will be a welcome and positive addition to our neighborhood. In addition to approximately 1,400 units of affordable and market rate housing, the development will bring nearly 70,000 square feet of retail to a blighted site that has long been problematic to our community.

As the site is currently zoned for industrial use, many of the existing and past uses of this site are inappropriate and detrimental to our community. One example is the scourge of "car lots" and junkyards—often operating illegally—that detract from the area, present health hazards, rodent infestations, and in some cases fall prey to dangerous and illegal activities. The site also formerly hosted a night club which often caused violence to spill into our neighborhood. The club was used as a front for drug trafficking and money laundering and was closed after an FBI raid, and subsequently burned to the ground.

Other uses that have been proposed in this area in recent years—some on this exact site—include a slot casino, a trash transfer station, and strip clubs (one already exists on the site). These are just a few of examples of the types of uses that our community is constantly trying to fight off. To say that the Arbor Place development has transformational potential is an understatement at best.

Our community supported the original proposal for the site by Abdo Development which the zoning commission approved some two years ago. While the project has changed substantially, our community still believes that the positive aspects of this project far outweigh any negatives. In fact, many of the changes to the project such as reduced height, density and traffic are appealing. The more open layout of this development will provide greater accessibility to the retail establishments. Moreover, the developer has welcomed the input of the community in programming the plazas and open spaces.

Even so, we are well aware that there will still be an impact on our community both during and after construction, mainly in the form increased vehicular and pedestrian traffic. One concern of the community about the new development is that it no longer provides for one of the community amenities which our residents see as vital—a commitment to support the expansion of the recreation center in our neighborhood. This concern is heightened by the fact that previously planned facilities in the within development such as a health club are also no longer part of the project. Even with the reduced density of the project, our worry is that this will create a heightened demand for recreational facilities in the neighborhood that could overwhelm them.

We are pleased to have our new neighbors use the facilities at the recreation center such as the tennis and basketball courts, as well as the playground which is slated to be renovated and expanded in the coming months. However, we are concerned that the very small and outdated field house on this site will not support the needs of a vastly expanded community.

We understand that the economic downturn and tight financial markets are largely to blame for this circumstance. I am encouraged that both at our meeting and in subsequent conversations, the Abdo Company expressed continuing interest in engaging in some type of public-private partnership that would support the expansion of facilities at the recreation center. As the company has been forthcoming and open with the community, we are confident that this amenity is seen as a priority, and are hopeful that something can be worked out over time.

The nature of our community is unique. We enjoy the solitude and beauty of the natural surroundings offered by the Arboretum, yet we are also situated at the District's heavily traveled Northeast gateway. And yet what currently sits on the site of this proposed development today is unacceptable and, quite frankly, an embarrassment to our community, our city and our nation's capital. Our community views this project as a transformational development that has the prospect of accelerating a much needed revitalization of this area.

On behalf of the residents of the Arboretum neighborhood, I would like to express our sincere hope to see this project move forward and urge the commission to approve the requested zoning change.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bleik A. Pickett", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Bleik A. Pickett
President