



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Theology Department

May 22, 2011

To Members of the DC Zoning Commission,

I am a professor at Georgetown (ethics). I also serve as a live-in chaplain in one of the resident halls for first year students. The views expressed below are my own.

I want to express my strong support for Georgetown's campus plan. I also want to raise concerns about a few of the arguments raised by some opponents of the plan.

First, the OP report recommends that 100% of students be housed on Georgetown's campus by 2016. During a cross-examination by Georgetown, the OP representative suggested that concerns about the financial viability and negative consequences of such a proposal were outside the purview of the OP. That surprised me. The reason why the conversation up to now hasn't considered other solutions (for example, that Georgetown pay to staff an MPD officer on every neighborhood corner 24/7, or that it build its own metro-subway stop) is because we all know they are not realistic. The OP, however, seems to have decided that it was appropriate to propose a 'solution' in a fiscal and temporal bubble, without consideration of real-world consequences and costs. I am not familiar with the practices and expectations of the Office of Planning, but the decision to ignore all concerns with feasibility seems unhelpful and undermines the report's credibility. As a member of the faculty, I'm all too aware of the desperate crunch in office and meeting space. I'd hate to see us embrace some ill-conceived proposal without a real understanding of the negative consequences to university resources.

One might respond that there is no other choice - i.e., that, regardless of the consequences and costs, there is no other way to redress a problem that threatens to overwhelm the neighborhood and destroy its nature and character. This is the narrative told by some critics of the plan and I suspect it has become credible for many neighbors. But I think it is a bad narrative, dependent as it is on three implausible ideas: 1) Georgetown is not serious about trying to address the problem; 2) nothing is working and nothing can work; 3) the problem is as grave and destructive as neighborhood activists suggest.

ZONING COMMISSION
District of Columbia

CASE NO. 10-32

EXHIBIT NO. 160

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The first seems implausible to me because, in addition to the visible efforts undertaken by the university, I'm also aware of how costly neighborhood opposition has been to the university's aspirations over the years. Given how much the university has had to forgo in this planning cycle (as it has in each of the past 10-year cycles), it does not make much sense to think that the university would take lightly its efforts to appease neighbors. The second seems implausible just in principle: nothing short of ridding the neighborhood of students can work? Really? *Nothing?* Moreover, while my knowledge of GU's programs in neighborhood outreach are limited, I've had enough conversations with students and staff to believe that efforts by the university have had serious and salutary consequences for students as they make choices about how they socialize.

The third is the crux of the issue: are things really that bad? Here, of course, good people can and will disagree on questions like, "How frequent and how severe must disturbances be before they are 'too much'?" and, "What are the best ways for measuring such disturbances?" Unfortunately, I have not seen much in the way of clear data. For reasons others have mentioned, I'm not ready to use the number of 911 calls as a reliable indicator (given that encouraging such calls has recently come to have strategic value for opponents). I can also understand why neighbors would not want to accept increase in property value as a sign that all is fine in the neighborhood. We seem to be left with a shouting match where the winner will be determined by which side can tell the most dramatic anecdotes and in greatest quantity – the neighbors' stories of student evil countered by the university's stories of student goodness and generosity.

My own view: I do not recognize Georgetown students in the narrative that has been crafted about them by neighborhood critics. Yes, there is a minority of students that is capable of the kinds of bad behavior recounted by neighborhood critics; the possibility of such isolated incidents strikes me as quite plausible. But my sense is that there is an 'excess' in the story that has been constructed, both in regard to how severe and widespread the problem is made out to be and in regard to claims about how universal the support is for such a view within the Georgetown neighborhood. This 'rhetoric of excess' is, of course, strategically beneficial for the goal of ridding the neighborhood of students, but I think it is false. I've lived closely with Georgetown students in both freshmen and upperclassman dorms for over ten years now (by choice); I'm well aware of the nocturnal habits of students. I've seen nothing to make me think that Georgetown students fit the narrative that is being told about them by some neighborhood critics.

The fact that this rhetoric of excess has become plausible to many people might say more about the power of the stereotypes it relies on and about the political connectedness of the people telling the story. I believe the statement by Vincent Orange ("I know what happens when students move into the community: it's parties every single day") well represents those two dynamics and is itself an indication that something has gone wrong in public attitudes towards students and in the public conversations about them.

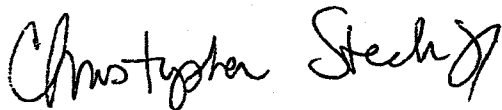
What's happening in this statement by Orange? First, a group is accused of regular and repeated moral failure. Second, the moral failure is one that happens to fit with a popular stereotype of that group. Third, mere membership in this group is such that one will, inevitably, be guilty of that moral failure. Fourth, the moral failure is such that nothing can alter its course or lessen its severity once certain conditions are in place. Finally, we can make one additional observation based on the fact that the statement was made by an elected official: the group criticized in the statement lacks any real political power since the official shows no concern about attacking what is a fairly large group of citizens in a way that is at once severe, sweeping, and completely lacking in nuance.

I find this troubling. Indeed, it is the reason I write this reflection. I believe the very excess of the rhetoric implied in statements like that of Orange is itself a reason to reject the claims that lie at their heart; the excess of such statements undermines their credibility. Whether it's a claim about the ubiquity of student drunkenness, the university obduracy about legitimate neighborhood concerns, or the apocalyptic demise of the neighborhood, something is wrong with the narrative that has been constructed, and it is a wrongness that, I think, goes beyond mere strategic exaggeration.

I hope the commission can move beyond a rhetoric of excess and is able to discern within the war of anecdotes a more balanced account of the situation and of the genuine problems that both sides are struggling to address.

Thank you for your time and your consideration of these views.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christopher Steck". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style. The first name "Christopher" is written in a more formal cursive, while "Steck" is written more quickly and with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

(Fr.) Christopher Steck, SJ