



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Theology Department

June 9, 2011

Members of the DC Zoning Commission,

Dear Commissioners,

I contributed a response last month (submitted May 22). I wanted to add some additional reflections after the last two hearings.

Community Building: A Jesuit Value

A couple of the witnesses spoke about Jesuit values and the moral bearing of the university. I'm a Jesuit myself, but I'm not sure what one witness meant in describing 'trust' as a Jesuit value (not that I don't support it, of course). However, there is one Jesuit value that I think is important in this context, and it is a value that the commission can rightly appeal to in encouraging the university to be faithful to its own ideals: the value of community. (N.B. I wrote on the topic for the school newspaper back in 2005: <http://www.thehoya.com/a-community-that-lasts-a-lifetime-1.1884138>). I believe the university could do a better job in challenging students to work at building community relations. One practice that could help effect this is to encourage (require?) students living in the neighborhood to introduce themselves to every house surrounding them (i.e., imagine a 360 degree circle), to exchange contact information, and invite them to their homes (for those neighbors interested in such an exchange). [Perhaps this is already encouraged; if so, maybe additional incentives could be used to encourage the invigorate and deepen the practice.] Overcoming anonymity can do an enormous amount of good, I believe. It puts a damper on bad behavior and encourages good for a couple of reasons. First, we just naturally tend to be good around people we know. Second, the threat of being 'caught' increases as people come to know each other's name (there's a big difference between saying, "a student turned over our trash cans" and saying, "Mark Dwyer turned over our trash cans"). Knowing the names of students who live around them can really empower the neighbors. An environment where neighbors – both student and non-student – know one another will help the dynamics of "pride" and "shame" to achieve their natural, salutary effects.

Relatedly, I don't believe that the present underlying tensions can ever be effectively addressed by models that assume an exclusively adversarial relationship between neighbor and student. Both the neighbors and students have more goodness than that going for them; we need to complement a reliance on punitive measures with ones that build on the possibilities of cooperative behavior. I worry that if we decide that the only way to handle the town-gown problem is to force both sides to

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their separate corners, we will only cement the underlying tensions and that those tensions will keep re-appearing in new forms and in equally dysfunctional and unhealthy ways.

The concern about community is also one reason that I oppose the idea of developing satellite campuses for the undergraduate population. It is an essential part of the undergrad experience (in my mind at least; again see the essay I wrote, linked above) that undergrads have a chance to form deep and multiple connections with their peers.

Fear of Possible Horrors

I was struck by several comments (i.e., by Palandre, Radley, and Altemus, by others, I think) which suggested that a significant concern driving the debate is not (just) the direct experience of student misbehavior, but a deep fear that even if things are fine right now, it could still happen in any given year that a group of uncontrolled party-ers could move in next door. That is, it is not just what “is” that is the problem, but what “might be.” Given the recent publicity (i.e., over the last year) about bad student behavior and the widely-believed claim that more and more neighborhood homes are being converted into group student housing, it is not surprising that some neighbors are deeply concerned about the prospect of more university student-neighbors – i.e., about what might be. The fear is understandable if the students really were regularly guilty of the more sensational anecdotes and if there were as much expansion of student housing in the neighborhood as suggested by BCA leaders like L. Rubino. I believe, however, that claims about a growing university take-over of neighborhood housing have been shown to be false. I also believe that the regularity of student misbehavior has been grossly exaggerated, though that view is harder to prove objectively. If, however, I am right, then at least some of the neighborhood animus is being driven by a fear of a future scenario whose prospect is, in turn, based on bad information.

Miscellaneous

1. How can I justify my belief that students are not as bad as portrayed by some neighbors? I admit that I don’t have direct knowledge of most of what goes on in the neighborhood after midnight, so I could be rosy-colored in my views of the students. However, I don’t think that is the case. First, I would expect more problems in the freshmen dorm where I live if things were as bad in the neighborhood as implied. While the supervision of students is more than what I imagine is the case in the neighborhood, it is still not comprehensive. Yet, the only three problems I recall during this past academic year were: a bathroom left really dirty one weekend; a torn picture on one of the bulletin boards; and food left to spoil in the refrigerator in the community lounge (causing a permanent smell). Second, students often recount to me stories of their weekends, the good and the bad. In doing so, they are generally scornful of the same bad behavior that the neighbors condemn (“so uncool”; “what a loser”; “get a life”). Their humor is not puerile. Third, I’ve visited parties on the Village A rooftop and in the neighborhood (sometimes unexpectedly); I have seen students acting uncouth, but I haven’t seen the scandalous behavior

described by some (I'm not saying it doesn't happen; I'm just suggesting that given what I've seen, it's not a regular feature of student partying).

2. Some feel the university is doing nothing to address incidents of bad behavior; is that true? It is clear from the testimony that the university does follow up on at least some bad behavior (e.g., one witness who recounted the story of a student throwing something through her window, also implied that the student had been expelled shortly afterward). Unfortunately, since the university is bound by ethical and legal concerns surrounding confidentiality (e.g., FERPA), I imagine that there is more punitive action being undertaken than any of us can ever really know.

Thanks you for your consideration of these reflections.

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Steck SJ". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the "SJ" at the end being particularly stylized.

(Fr.) Christopher Steck, SJ