Testimony on The George Washington University Campus Plan

BZA Application No. 16553, before the Board of Zoning Adjustment of The District of Columbia

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Members of the Board of Zoning Adjustment: I appear before you today as a city planner, with more than 30 years of experience in the District, the Metropolitan Region, and elsewhere in the United States. Three aspects of that experience provide me with, what I believe to be, a unique perspective on the George Washington University campus plan that I would like to share with you.

First of all, I am a planner of colleges and universities. That began when I wrote a master's thesis on a long-range campus plan for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the Institute hired me to implement it as its first Planning Officer. As a consultant, I've now worked with more than 20 academic institutions across the country and overseas on their campus plans or specific projects.

Much of that work has been helping institutions and their immediate neighborhoods and/or host communities live cooperatively with each other. I was MIT's first Ambassador to Cambridge (in a situation much more rife with tension than any university/community setting in the District today) and, as a Woodrow Wilson visiting fellow, have for years been counselling colleges on community support programs they can initiate with their neighbors.

Finally, I design transportation management programs that reduce or contain employee commuting by automobile. Transportation Management (that is to say making public transit, car and van pooling attractive to workers and less expensive than driving alone) is essential to mitigate the growth impacts of major employers on nearby neighborhoods. Some years ago I helped the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission institute the most successful transportation management program of any governmental agency in the Metro Region. The results were so dramatic in reduction of anticipated traffic levels, that Montgomery County readily approved further NRC headquarters consolidation. Both the General Services Administration and I received professional awards for this, and out of it the Metrocheck program now in place across the country was born. As a function of this

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new campus plan the George Washington University will now be the largest private employer in the District of Columbia to operate a TMP. But more of that shortly.

The Colleges and Universities Didn't Leave

The most important point I can make from these strands of background is that, for central cities such as Washington, Chicago, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Boston, the colleges and universities they house are priceless assets. The health and growth potential of those institutions are absolutely critical to the intellectual and social as well as the economic futures of these cities and their neighborhoods. The reason is simple.

Over the last generation much of the middle class population has bailed out of these cities and moved to the suburbs. According to the Brookings Institution, between 1980 and 1997, for example, the City of Baltimore lost over 100,000 people, and Howard County alone grew by the same amount. Over the last generation, moreover, much of private sector business enterprises — from insurance companies to retail stores — has followed the middle class to suburban pastures and took their employees with them. Most new business starts avoided the core cities entirely. And that can be said for Washington as for Baltimore, Denver, Chicago, Boston, and many others.

But an extraordinary thing happened on the way to pursuit of the suburban American Dream. Colleges and universities did not join the stampede. With all the spatial shifts of millions of people, thousands of companies, tens of thousands of employees and many, many churches who followed their parishioners outward, I don't know a single institution of higher education whose administration, faculty, and alumni said "let's pack it". "Let's sell our facilities to the highest bidder and build a new campus in the sun." Some schools, such as Baltimore's Johns Hopkins as well as GW, created suburban satellites to capture the burgeoning market for advanced degrees. But they kept their downtown campuses, on which they had lavished extraordinary attention and spent millions in capital, through conscious decisions to make this new American urban setting work.

Other assets fled, but the colleges and universities stayed and took on new roles. One of these is as economic powerhouses. Rutgers is the largest employer in New Brunswick, as are Harvard and MIT in Cambridge. And George Washington, the institution whose campus plan you review today, is the largest single private employer in the District of

Columbia — a matter of economic significance that requires some consideration by regulatory bodies.

But economic significance is only one of the institutions' new roles. Enriching the social services and intellectual resources of their host communities is another, a matter that has not drawn sufficient attention in the Office of Planning Report to the BZA. Let me read to you from a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development document some comments that apply especially to George Washington's presence in this community:

> For institutions of higher education, applying . . . varied resources to the problems confronting urban America can be a fulfillment of their fundamental mission of teaching, research, and service and an investment in their very survival. Involvement in the community helps colleges attract and develop responsible and energetic students, providing them with learning experiences that generate intellectual excitement, test and enrich what they learn in the classroom, and build pragmatic competence. Participation in partnerships with community residents can reshape questions addressed in research, produce new sources of information, and lead to new insights, understandings and lessons learned . . . the destinies of cities and their universities are interwoven in very direct, tangible ways.[1]

Appendix B of the University's submission describes the myriad of community service activities which GWU performs in the District of Columbia, the wider metropolitan area, and in the Foggy Bottom and West End neighborhoods. Those activities enrich the university's educational offerings as well as the Washington community.

Relationships between urban colleges and universities and their immediate neighborhoods are not always easy, however. Indeed, they are often very complicated. Universities seek stable neighborhoods as settings which enhance the values and attractions of their campuses and can provide safe and affordable nearby housing for faculty and students. Many nearby residents with no ties to the institutions, moreover, elect to live in campus neighborhoods because of the cultural and service activities at their doorsteps and the amenities a handsome campus provides.

Contrary to the Office of Planning Report, dynamic universities can be stabilizing influences to ensure quality next-door neighborhoods. Examples are legion: Harvard and MIT, Rutgers, Cincinnati, Cal Berkeley, Columbia and NYU as well as GW.

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[1] U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Colleges and Communities, Partners in Urban Revitalization*, March 1998, P. 2.

But tensions do exist, and existence of such tensions and conflicts must be recognized among the facts of urban life. They can't all be negotiated away. A great deal of effort across the country is being devoted to addressing the tensions, to establishing mechanisms for communication between schools and neighbors, and, by the the universities, mitigating impacts of growth and change on the immediate area.

That effort occurs at GW as well as at places such as Penn, Harvard, and the Chicago campus of the University of Illinois. Let me turn now to some of those activities and commitments at GW geared to mitigate the impacts of its growth. These are matters that help warrant support for BZA approval of a most reasonable 10 year campus plan which asks for no more development and no greater campus population than what the BZA has already approved in the 1985 Campus Plan.

Transportation management

One of the most dramatic steps universities can take to mitigate growth impacts is to establish transportation management programs that provide incentives for employees to come to work by public transit and pooling and leave the single occupant automobile at home. This helps relieve traffic and parking problems in the neighborhood. George Washington has, as an element of its master plan, committed to one of the most ambitious transportation management programs of any private employer in the entire Washington Metropolitan area.

Let me give you some numbers. Right now, with no special incentives to use Metro, about 50 percent of GW's Faculty and Staff come and go by public transportation. That's a very high figure for an urban employer at the fringe of downtown. It's due to the Foggy Bottom Metro station and good bus connections, as well as the high cost of parking at the University and the relative impossibility of long-term parking on the streets. Right now, however, car and van pooling, are essentially non-existent.

For the 2010 Campus Plan, the University has set a target, and a pretty bold one, of 60 percent faculty and staff travelling by public transportation and an additional 5 percent in pools. If those targets are met, despite the projected growth in faculty and staff, about the same number of employees would be commuting by automobile, but the numbers of automobiles would decrease, and over 400 fewer employees would be driving alone. Close to 3,000 more individuals would be riding public transit.

The University will establish the following incentives to bring these conditions about:

•Metrocheck Payroll Deduction. GWU will establish transit payroll deductions for all employees who sign up for the program and will absorb the administrative costs. Under current IRS rules, up to $65 monthly before taxes can be deducted. The figure rises to $100 by 2002. This is $780 annually sheltered from taxes, up to $1200 annually in two years. For those suburbanites who park in fringe locations and take Metro or commuter rail, say at Vienna or Shady Grove, the pre-tax benefit is even greater — up to $175 monthly for the fringe parking alone. GWU will then sell Metrochecks to the employees which can be used for public transit and van pools throughout the region.

•Other incentives. These include the Emergency Ride Home program for those who don't have a car on campus, preferential rates for car pools in GW facilities, maintenance of the shuttle between Foggy Bottom and Mount Vernon Campus, and continuation of market rate charges for employees and visitors in University parking facilities.

Interestingly enough, only 15 percent of the student body drives to and from Campus, according to the recent Gorove/Slade surveys. The University's commitment to increase on-campus housing, its intent to provide all entering Freshmen with Metro Smart Cards, and its continued efforts to lobby for student fares on public transit should expand student use of transit. In short, the University has embarked on an extraordinary effort at traffic suppression along with the submission of its campus plan.

Community Services

George Washington University and its students provide an exceptional set of services to the immediate Foggy Bottom community. These are services which enrich and diversify the university, benefit the neighborhood, and contribute to the synergy that makes Foggy Bottom a special place. They should not be denigrated.

Ensuring security is one of these, especially in an urban setting. The university has provided the Metropolitan Police with a Foggy Bottom sub-station at 22nd Street N.W. University Police, moreover, regularly patrol in Foggy Bottom and are the proverbial "eyes and ears on the street" to avert trouble. And finally, the handsome emergency telephone

kiosks placed at intervals on the streets within the campus proper are accessible to neighborhood residents as well as the University community.

GW's services to senior citizens are particularly important in light of the age distribution of neighborhood residents. More than 27 percent of the residents in Census Tract 56, i.e. the section of Foggy Bottom between 23rd Street and the expressways, are aged 65 and over according to 1998 census estimates. This amounts to close to 1,000 people and is double the District average. In addition to immediate presence of the hospital, the university provides some important supportive services. Members of the student association help seniors with errands and grocery shopping and have essentially adopted the St. Mary's Court assisted housing project on 24th street. GW offers discounts to area seniors for performances at Lisner Auditorium, special exhibits, and for auditing courses. Foggy Bottom is a very supportive place for senior citizens.

Foggy Bottom and West End residents have admission and use privileges at the Gelman Library, and the Library maintains a Foggy Bottom historic archives, directed by the University Archivist, and introduced with a major public exhibition this past August. This is the historic record of the Foggy Bottom neighborhood.

Public access to the University Bookstore and the several fast food restaurants within the Marvin Center are of no small value to the neighborhood as available services.

Amenities

It is quite easy to contrast the inviting plazas, the plantings of gardens and trees, the benches and other street furniture, and the sculpture of George Washington University with the sterility and exclusivity conveyed by its institutional neighbors — the World Bank and the State Department. Having worked for all three and spent a great deal of time within their buildings, I can make that point without equivocation or fear of contradiction.

When I first arrived in Washington, more than 30 years ago, Foggy Bottom was not a particularly attractive or welcoming environment. That situation has markedly changed as the University has responded to residents, as well as alumni, and the directives of the BZA in creating a distinct "sense of place" on the campus and at its edge. University Yard, Mid-Campus Quad, the Professors' Gate, Veterans Memorial Park, Alumni Walk and other designed spaces are available to the neighborhood as well as the University family.

The sculpture, the banners, and the uniform signage help, almost all created within the last decade. At the very least we are talking about pleasant places and spaces, something of an oasis in the Downtown.

That's a world of difference from a generation ago. Indeed, the University has extended its amenities program beyond the campus itself by working with the District Government to replace dead street trees throughout the entire neighborhood. I think that the program could be extended even further, working with, and I emphasize with, residents of Foggy Bottom to identify public places in the residential area where some landscaping assistance from the University would be welcome.

The Comprehensive Plan

Actually, the adopted Comprehensive Plan of the District calls for GW to assist the neighborhood with landscaping. The Ward 2 element of the Comp Plan was adopted almost a year ago and in depicting the university's development plan (Sec. 1340) stated that it should improve adjacent residential neighborhoods:

> by improved landscaping, better lighting, and enhanced community policing.

Clearly, the community policing and improved lighting have come to pass. Landscaping of the campus itself has been exceptional, and, if community interest is there, the amenities program can be extended to the larger neighborhood where needed most.

Other Ward 2 directives are reflected in the GW campus plan.

Both Sections 1327 and Sections 1342 emphasize increased on-campus provision of student housing. The Plan responds to that directive. Section 1308 calls for containing transportation impacts, a matter addressed both by the transportation management program I have described and modest expansion of on-campus parking supply.

Section 1327 asks the University to work closely with the Foggy Bottom community in developing its campus plan. Reasonable people may differ in their interpretations, but I believe the University — despite inevitable conflicting interests within this dynamic urban setting — has made a good faith effort to communicate its needs and listen to and mitigate

neighborhood concerns. Most important is the University's commitment to keep the dialogue going continually with formal periodic meetings. While concurrence in views may well be elusive, civilized communication is an iron necessity.

Perhaps the most pertinent objective in the Comprehensive Plan is that for Major Institutional Complexes, Section 1341. It states that

> the objective for major institutional complexes is to undertake coordinated planning for the continued, reasonable development of major institutional complexes in Ward 2.

That is precisely what the BZA has before it in the 2010 George Washington Campus Plan, and I urge your approval.