Board of Zoning Adjustment

Application No. 16556

Testimony
March 15, 2000

Dr. Richard J. Scaldini
President
Board of Directors
The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital, Inc.
("JPDS-NC")

Good morning, Chairperson Reid and Members of the Board.
I am Dick Scaldini, president of the Board of Directors of JPDS-NC. I am a lifelong educator and the father of Ben Scaldini, a student in the 5th grade at JPDS-NC.

I am very pleased to appear before you to present The Jewish Primary Day School's application to locate our school temporarily at the Ohev Sholom and Tifereth Israel synagogues.

I am not pleased to have to say that, if our application is not approved, the future of our school will be in serious jeopardy. For a school with 13 years of distinguished service in the District of Columbia to face extinction for lack of temporary space is tragic, especially when suitable and desirable space is ready to hand. However, I know that the BZA's obligation is to act not only with your hearts but also with your minds on the basis of the zoning laws of the District of Columbia. So, we will make that case today, and it is a very strong one.

The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital, Inc. is a kindergarten through sixth grade elementary school open to all and founded in 1987. We are known as a "community" school serving the broad range of the Jewish community. We offer a dual curriculum comprised of strong and integrated programs in Judaic and secular studies. JPDS-NC prides itself on bringing together in a nurturing environment students and families of distinctly different religious and cultural backgrounds. Our Head of School, Susan Koss, will tell you more about our program, but I want to emphasize our mission as an institution in this community.

We are committed to serving the District of Columbia and to holding up a model of American Jewish life and learning in the nation's capital. We are the only Jewish Day School in the District of Columbia. Our mission statement speaks in particular about our role not only in the Jewish community, but in the greater community of Washington, D.C. as a whole:

> "We foster social consciousness and a sense of responsibility for ***tikkun olam*** - perfecting the world."

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We are not an elite or elitist institution. Our tuition for 2000-2001 has been set at approximately $8,000. This is slightly above the amount that the District of Columbia spends per student. In fact it represents only about 75% of the amount we spend per student, the rest being covered through donations. Our tuition places us in the middle of the range for private Jewish schools in the greater metropolitan area and very low in the range of all private schools. Why is this?

It is because The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital has for years sought to keep its cost affordable in order to exclude no one from the benefits of its program for financial reasons. To this end, unlike many private schools that are forced to restrict the availability of financial aid in the face of rising costs, JPDS-NC has set itself the goal of more than doubling its financial aid from its present level of 4% to be on a par with the national average for Jewish day schools of 10%.

Our commitment to the Washington community is not just talk. Susan Koss will tell you about the many JPDS-NC activities in the community, but I want to show you a few highlights.

SLIDES

1) JPDS-NC students meet with A.J. Wood of D.C. United.

JPDS-NC students raised almost $9,000 in the 1999 Multiple Sclerosis Read-a-Thon, leading all schools in the District of Columbia. A JPDS student, Ian Epler, was the top reader of all D.C. students with 246 books! In recognition of our students' efforts, A.J. Wood of D.C. United visited the school.

2) JPDS-NC students light menorah with President at the White House.

JPDS-NC students presented the tradition of Chanukah at the White House and joined President Clinton in lighting the menorah.

3) JPDS-NC students brief the Vice President on a forthcoming trip to Israel.

Prior to a trip to Israel, JPDS-NC students discussed the country and its geo-political situation with Vice President Gore.

To make a long story short, we are the only Jewish day school in the District of Columbia and our departure would leave a significant gap in the community and in the educational spectrum of the capital.

The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital, Inc. is a small school. We have 180 students, representing 135 families of which half are resident in the District of Columbia, and almost half of the rest live nearby, many of them working or running businesses in the District. We were created to remedy the absence of a Jewish elementary school in the District. The only alternatives are located in Rockville, and would not be viable for most of our parents largely living and working in the district.

Our impact on the Shepherd Park neighborhood will be small. As our parents bring their children to school and pick them up, we are talking about:

- 20 minutes in the morning, with 40 cars on one side of 16th street and 28 cars on the other.

- 25 minutes in the afternoon with 22 cars on one side of the street and 15 cars on the other.

We have a long and successful history of traffic management at the Porter and Quebec Street site of Adas Israel synagogue. This bodes well for our ability to manage a far less difficult traffic situation in Shepherd Park.

You may ask: Why is locating the school at Ohev Sholom and Tifereth Israel so urgent for us?

JPDS-NC became an independent institution in 1999, and by prior agreement with Adas Israel Congregation, is scheduled to relocate from its present home in June 2000. Beginning in June 1998, JPDS-NC launched an exhaustive search for a new home - either permanent or temporary - in the District. Then, in June 1999, in recognition of our outstanding track record and great potential, we were made the partial gift of a wonderful property in the Forest Hills neighborhood of the District. Subject to this Board's approval, it will become our permanent home in three years after we have completed the application, development and construction processes.

The need therefore arose to find an interim home for the three years of the development period. This search proved to be the most difficult of all since, as we, you and our opponents well know, suitable space for an elementary school is scarce in the District. Our efforts included:

- Contacting all the appropriate city agencies regarding available city properties – both schools and other – and following up diligently.

- Contacting all synagogues, churches and schools that would be feasible locations, including discussing with Adas Israel the extension of our lease.

- Working with real estate agents to look for property to build or lease, including commercial space.

The following are a few of the sites we considered and pursued unsuccessfully:

- A land site on Wisconsin Avenue in Friendship Heights: too small; the developer ended up buying it.
- The Hardy School (we bid and lost out to the Rock Creek international School).
- The Owl School (They raised the money to buy the property).
- The Dickson Mansion: it was only suitable for development as a permanent site.
- The original Georgetown Day School: renovated office space, available for sale only and too small for a permanent site.
- Potential temporary sites in Maryland: none proved available in time or of sufficient size.

At the end of 1999 having pursued without success a variety of alternatives, we were able to work out with Tifereth Israel and Ohev Sholom a way to accommodate the school in their spaces and schedules. Substantial renovation would be required at Ohev Sholom. Consequently, we were under extreme time pressure to file our application with the BZA in order to have a response - hopefully favorable - in time to do the necessary construction for the start of the school year.

Adding to the time pressure, our parents need to know by early April if we had a place to go in order to register their children for school next year. The need to move quickly led to a situation that we deeply regret: we were able to notify the neighbors of our intention to locate the school at the two synagogues only shortly before we filed and before we were able to have a completed traffic plan ready to present. We have apologized to the neighbors of Shepherd Park for this situation that represents the constraints of circumstance and not an attempt to deceive or impose a "stealth school" on the neighborhood.

I have attempted to demonstrate the importance of JPDS-NC to the District of Columbia community. Let me close with some examples of the efforts we are making to enrich the Shepherd Park community by our presence. The Board of Directors of JPDS-NC has authorized the following community initiatives:

1. Creation of a Community Liaison Committee comprised of representatives from the neighborhood, and from the boards of JPDS-NC, Tifereth Israel, and Ohev Sholom. The neighborhood representative would have the right to put items on the agenda of the monthly meetings of the JPDS-NC board of directors.

2. A cap of 205 students at the school during the three years we are at Tifereth Israel and Ohev Sholom.

3. An adult education program free to Shepherd Park residents and JPDS-NC parents.

4. Cultural exchange programs to be developed with Shepherd Elementary School.

Of course, we will continue the existing JPDS-NC community outreach programs that Susan Koss will tell you about.

Over its 13 year history, The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital, Inc. has established itself as an asset to the District of Columbia. As the only Jewish Day School in the capital, it is crucial that we have your support to survive.

Ladies and gentlemen, our small school has been welcomed at the White House, please find it in your hearts to welcome us in Shepherd Park.