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Commission rejects Field School request

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The Field School suffered a setback this week in its effort to move to a new Foxhall Road campus, with the advisory neighborhood commission representing Wesley Heights and the Palisades voting unanimously to oppose the application.

Chair Eleanor Roberts Lewis called the school's proposal to transform the Cafritz estate into its new campus one of the most difficult issues to come before the commission in her tenure.

"For every solution we find, it appears to hoist the problem onto someone else," Lewis said as she started to read the resolution drafted by commissioner Ann Heuer.



Bill Petros/The Current

The Field School hopes to use the Cafritz estate as its new campus.

The Field School had hoped that a revised traffic plan presented last week would satisfy neighborhood

See Field/Page 20

FIELD

From Page 1

concerns. By expanding the use of shuttle buses, staggering the starting times and requiring faculty members to arrive by 7:30 a.m., board of trustees chair Larry Buck said that school officials had followed the neighborhood commission's challenge to develop creative solutions that would reduce the number of new cars on Foxhall Road.

Buck and others from the school also vowed that they would be good neighbors.

"If we create the problem, we will fix it," said teacher Clay Kaufman. "We want to make this a beautiful property that preserves the character and the spirit of the Cafritzes."

In its resolution, the commission urged the Board of Zoning Adjustment — now scheduled to take up the case on March 29 — to reject the application on the grounds that it would reduce traffic safety and increase congestion along Foxhall Road and that it is not consistent with the area's residential zoning.

If the zoning board does decide to approve the school, the commission urged several conditions — a reduction in the number of parking spaces to cut down on the amount of asphalt, a possible cap on the population or number of vehicles on campus, and the development of a traffic plan acceptable to the D.C. Department of Public Works and the commission. The commission also suggested consideration of a third lane near the school to permit traffic to turn left without blocking traffic.

After the meeting, Heuer said that current plans do not adequately address the consequences of more cars on Foxhall Road.

"It's putting a round ball into a square hole, particularly in terms of traffic," said Heuer, who represents the site's immediate neighbors. "We need a comprehensive look, not a patch here and a patch there."

The prospect of a third lane — also recommended as a possible mitigating measure by Department of Public Works planner Ken Laden — is uncertain. Field School attorney Phil Feola said that traffic engineers hired by the school looked at the possibility and concluded that the twists and turns in the road rule out a left-turn entrance into the school anywhere but the northern end of the parcel.

The Kreeger Museum, immediately to the north, has a wall that would make it difficult to expand

BZA
CASE No. 16559
EXHIBIT No. 372

MAR 29 2000

the road there. Feola said the school would willingly pay for construction of the new lane if the city provided a right of way, the museum moved the wall or the city acted to condemn private property.

Monday's vote followed roughly two hours of discussion, the fifth time the commission has heard presentations and testimony on the issue. Among the speakers were Field School students and parents, who pleaded for the neighborhood to welcome the school.

The controversial proposal has divided many neighborhood residents and organizations, most of whom made presentations to the commission on Monday.

The Spring Valley-Wesley Heights Citizens Association testified in opposition to the project unless the plan were modified to include dedicated left-turn lanes. "We don't see any other way it's conceivable that this small but very crucial artery can handle the additional traffic," said Bill Harrop, the association's president.

Last week, the Palisades Citizens Association voted to support the school's application as long as the plan bans left turns into the campus from 7:30 a.m. to 9 a.m. and the Department of Public Works implemented a traffic mitigation plan.

The Foxhall Crescents Homeowners Association submitted a resolution that opposed left turns into the Field School campus at any time, a view shared by Chain Bridge Road resident Richard England.

Neighbors Against Foxhall Gridlock, a group comprised of some of the closest neighbors, argued against allowing the school at the site altogether. Attorney Richard Aguglia argued the zoning regulations do not permit a school that would have adverse effects on the neighborhood.

The Wesley Heights Association for the Preservation of Residential Streets, a committee of the Wesley Heights Historical Society, testified in support of the proposal. Early on, the association won a commitment that Field would not use lower 44th Street to access the school. Member Lisa Natanson noted that the school would preserve much of the estate's green space and had worked to protect Glover-Archbold Park.

The lengthy discussion included competing views of the traffic woes along Foxhall Road. Some describe the problem as gridlock, but others see it as speeding motorists, which the addition of a 15 mph school zone speed limit might cure.

"The problem is not gridlock," Kaufman said. "The problem is people going too fast."

Foxboro Place resident Jennifer Calari agreed, saying she could not safely walk with her children just a few blocks along Foxhall. "I actually welcome the slowing impact the school will have," she said.

Others argued that hopes for slower traffic were not reason to support the school, with one resident saying that the commission should take up traffic-calming measures as a separate matter.

"Surely our neighborhood can do things to slow down traffic," the resident said. "The traffic problem needs resolution. ... What we're getting instead is a different traffic problem, a much greater traffic problem."

A Hoban Street resident, who described himself as agnostic on whether the city should permit a school at the site but suggested a reversal of the left-turn ban, asked why residents were so concerned about helping the commuters who use Foxhall Road.

Aguglia countered that commuters would respond to gridlock by using neighborhood streets, placing joggers and dog walkers in jeopardy on roads without sidewalks.

"This is not just about helping commuters," said Aguglia, who noted that the Public Works report described Foxhall Road as being at or over capacity in the morning and evening.

All the talk about traffic, school defenders said, bolsters the likelihood that many parents will turn instead to the proposed shuttle system. The shuttle service would pick up students and drop them off at the Tenleytown and Foggy Bottom Metro stations, as well as at least two other sites.

"I have no desire to go down Foxhall at 60 mph or at 15 mph," said one parent, who lives near American University.