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July 18, 2002

Mr. Geoffrey Griffis
Chairman
District of Columbia Board of Zoning Adjustment
441 4th Street, NW, Room 210
Washington, DC 20001

Dear Chairman Griffis:

I write in opposition to the request of Field School for a Modification of BZA Order No. 16559.

As far back as February, the Field School knew it was not going to do the required road work (Condition #9), due to a Federal windfall. (See Attachment) On March 27th, Ken Laden told John Finney and myself that "if Field School wanted to 'pony up' the money to do the road work it could start tomorrow." On April 30th, the last community meeting with the school, the school informed those present that the responsibility for the road work rests with the District. What the school did not say is that it had not presented the District with adequate drawings for the new entrance. As a result, the District has been required to produce the design and drawings for the new entrance (Conditions 28-37). The school wants its windfall and an entrance in time for school to open at the beginning of September.

Last night, the ANC was asked to approve a set of interim traffic measures from Mr. Laden so Field School might proceed to the BZA. Mr. Laden was unable to attend the meeting and his deputy, Rick Rybeck, was not informed about the project. Never-the-less, the ANC voted to approve the interim measures with minor changes and to permit the school to proceed to the BZA for an emergency hearing.

My opposition stems from the fact that the school is placing the BZA, the ANC, various city agencies and this community in the position of having to grant permission for it to open with interim traffic measures in place. From the start of this project, the major concerns have been, and continue to be, traffic and safety. Apparently, Mr. Laden feels measures that were not acceptable in the school's original application are now acceptable. It is not only the staff and students of Field School whose safety is at risk, it is the 17,500 drivers who use Foxhall Road on a daily basis. Additionally, consideration must be given to the fact that the school would be in operation while road construction is underway.

An interesting point was raised at the ANC meeting. The school would be having after school sports activities involving other schools. Visiting teams place an additional burden on the safety

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of drivers on Foxhall Road because they are not placed under the same restrictions as the students of Field School and are likely to be oblivious to them.

The school has placed itself in jeopardy. Did it need to sell its present location without assurance that students would have a place to attend school in September? Is this dilemma the community's problem, or is it a problem for the Chairman of the Board of Field School who knew the construction on Foxhall Road would not be complete for the opening of school. There is an old adage that springs to mind, "Lack of planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part." The school has placed the BZA in a Solomon-like position and is asking it to weigh the safety of the community against the need of a school that was unwilling to prepare the required plans and spend the necessary funds to complete the required road work. I might feel differently if there were some guarantee that the necessary road work would be completed within 8 weeks and that it would begin no later than September 1, 2002, but this community has been waiting for DDOT to install a traffic light at Foxhall and Whitehaven for several years and the department has been unable to give a date when that work would begin. Past history has shown that there are no guarantees with DDOT.

My dear friend and colleague, John Finney, cautioned me not to become "a wart on the ass of progress." It is not my intention. Rather, there are times when principles must prevail and institutions and individuals should be held accountable for their actions. I ask that the BZA hold firm on the original set of conditions and deny a modification to BZA Order No.16559.

Sincerely,

Alma H. Gates

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Enclosure (1)

The Northwest Current

Davis Kennedy/Publisher & Editor
Chris Kain/Managing Editor

Congressional largess

A $2 million grant is certainly a minuscule portion of the $59.6 billion transportation appropriations bill recently approved by Congress and signed by President Bush.

Even though this grant is going to the District for improvements to Foxhall Road, we are quite troubled by it.

Normally, of course, we would be pleased about any congressional recognition of the need to improve the city's infrastructure. Indeed, Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton is preparing to push legislation to enact tax credits that will help steer federal dollars into road repairs for the District, citing the huge impact that Maryland and Virginia drivers — exempt from any commuter tax — have on the city's roads.

The Foxhall Road project, however, stems exclusively from the new campus under construction by the Field School on the former Cafritz estate. In fact, the requirement for a widened street, a new left-turn lane and a traffic signal was imposed on the school by the Board of Zoning Adjustment as one of its conditions in approving the school.

We think this is an inappropriate use of tax money. Other private schools in the District, and probably across the country, have had to use their own funds for similar improvements.

Additionally, the project's origin as a condition for approval makes government funding particularly unseemly. John Finney, the newly elected chair of the Palisades advisory neighborhood commission, was right that it seems to do an "end-run" around the city's regulatory process.

School officials argue that the project will benefit everyone who uses Foxhall Road, not just parents, students and staff accessing the school. That is true, but so, too, is the fact that the changes would not have been necessary but for the planned Field School campus. Although Foxhall Road may present safety issues, we doubt that the city would have devised exactly these improvements to cure the problems without the campus.