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Federation of Citizens Associations of the District of Columbia

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July 17, 2000

BZA Case No. 16566

TESTIMONY OF GUY GWYNNE

The Federation and its Consortium of Impacted Communities are deeply concerned about this first of five campus plans, all to be presented in the near future for BZA approval. At least fifteen of the city's key communities will be directly affected by how these ten-year plans are decided. Some of these neighborhoods are already painfully impacted by past university expansion and activity, and all are faced with possible additional major impact from ambitious, expansionist campus plans up for requested approval. My own community of Burlieth is arguably impacted by Georgetown University housing policy to the point of saturation.

No other problem between universities and nearby residential communities approaches in importance that of off-campus students who are forced into the communities by lack of on-campus housing. Of Burleith's 540 small row-houses, for example, over 100 of these are student rental houses. This is the case in spite of some recent entry into the local housing market of young families and couples responding to tax incentives and other factors. Virtually unregulated rooming houses are a booming business in Burleith.

Increased demand from a large number of additional students would critically worsen the situation.

As I point out in the attached published opinion, the past and present destabilizing impacts on communities from large influxes of students attracted but unprovided for by universities are:

- Unreasonable noise
- Parking problems
- Additional traffic
- Undue amounts of garbage and trash about
- Reduced property values as the number of students increases. (The present heated real estate market would be better under different circumstances.)
- Impacted-taxpayer flight from the city
- Diluted resident voter impact

Limited university community relations efforts have eased the general situation in some areas to a limited extent, but have not solved what is at root a systemic problem: insufficient on-campus housing.

Additional on-campus housing, not additional students without housing, is the solution.

BZA
Case No. 16566
Exhibit No. 147

Board of Zoning Adjustment
District of Columbia
CASE NO.16566
EXHIBIT NO.147

We note that several universities have advanced, or reportedly will advance, the notion that the correct measure of off-campus student populations in residential communities should be the PERCENTAGE of total students on and off campus. For impacted communities this is not a major consideration. What matters is the actual number of students, occupying the actual number of houses and apartments, driving and parking the actual number of vehicles, and the actual numbers of frustrated taxpayers who sell out and abandon the impacted area. Percentages are relativities only. The numbers in real terms are what the Federation urges the Board to concentrate on. The effective community impact lies in these.

Regarding the issue of aligning Georgetown University's north campus entrance No. 1 with short 38th Street in Burleith, Burleith and the surrounding communities recommend against this, because:

- Making 38th Street a continuation of the GU north campus area would unduly increase campus-departing traffic onto densely inhabited residential streets, especially S and T Streets.
- The present arrangement is a workable one.
- Such an alignment would necessitate the installation of a traffic island in the middle of Reservoir Road.

Burleith streets are already unduly impacted by traffic that shortcuts from Reservoir Road up 39th Street, through heavily populated S and T Streets, en route to the 37th Street thoroughfare.

This would stand to be doubly severe if the traffic barriers between the north and south campuses were removed. As it is, these barriers are fairly porous, with taxis and other vehicles being able to traverse the separation.

Mayor Williams clearly stated at the May Federation banquet that he recognizes that some communities "are drowning" from undue university impact, and that no further such negative impact should be allowed. Rather, he urged that future expansion be off campus and in needful areas of the city. There is precedent for this as well. However, there is no indication of this principle in either the Georgetown proposed plan or in the recommendations of the Office of Planning. This solution should be reconsidered.

I would like to recommend that the Board approach with extreme care the notion that a timed 389-undergraduate GU enrollment increase without on-campus housing to match, together with a possible 1,300 graduate student increase, would not violate zoning code impact prohibitions. Unavoidably, such additional students would flood into the communities, engender big rents for even more house acquisitions by rental landlords, and cause even more unavoidable community impact.

Given present city enforcement capabilities, elaborate expressed Office of Planning hopes, recommendations, periodic bilateral conferences and to-be-defined conditions for already-granted enrollment increases are dubious. The Board is being urged to grant immediate, somewhat-conditioned approval of 389 more GU students, with possible recruitment to start immediately. This is putting the cart before the horse. In addition, a whopping 1,300 graduate student increase would presumably be considered later under similar conditions. Rather, it would be advisable to work out and apply IN ADVANCE an outline of conditions under which universities could be assisted in qualifying for future expansion of enrollments, campus construction, housing and possible branching out into other, non-impacted parts of the city.

We urge the Board in its order on the Georgetown University campus plan to include the following:

- Retain the current (1990) undergraduate enrollment cap, until long-planned additional on-campus housing for currently off-campus students is completed.
- Disallow the request before the Board for 389 additional undergraduate students, until on-campus housing has been built to accommodate them.
- Include graduate students in the Board's considerations of student enrollment numbers and their impact on surrounding communities.
- Disallow any request for a realignment of the north campus entrance No. 1 with 38th Street into Burleith.
- Consider requiring that projected new major and traffic-engendering sport and theatrical facilities be located in other, needful parts of the city.

Thank you Madam Chair and Board members.

Colleges' 10-year campus plans need some tough grading

It is university campus plan time again. The D.C. government and the 15 residential communities already impacted by major universities are approaching an important crossroads, as the institutions present 10-year campus plans to the D.C. Board of Adjustment for approval, disapproval or emendation.

Two universities, Georgetown and George Washington, have submitted their ambitious projections. American and Catholic universities will present plans for expansion later this year and early next year. Neighboring communities are interfacing, reasoning and grappling as best they can on limited resources and volunteer help with powerful, expansionist institutions.

As usual, the universities' negotiations and presentations are all in a consortium and well represented by an expert law firm. This time around, however, the mayor, the director of the Office of Planning and the impacted communities are decrying existing conditions that stem from past university expansions.

In the neighborhoods abutting colleges, no other problem is as important as the lack of on-campus university housing for students. This dearth compels students with nowhere else to go to flood into nearby, usually small rented row houses in communities zoned for single families.

The current magnitude of the problem is staggering: George Washington University has more than 11,000 off-campus students. Georgetown has 2,414. American University is estimated at more than 4,000. Catholic University is joining the trend, with a recent increase in its freshman enrollment without an increase in housing on campus.

The impact on communities from students living off-campus are:

- Unreasonable noise.
- Parking problems.
- Undue amounts of garbage and trash.
- Reduced property values as the number of student renters increases. (The present heated real estate market would be under different circumstances.)
- Taxpayer flight from the city.
- Resident voting impact is decreased.

University-community relations efforts have eased the general situation in some areas to a limited degree, but have not resolved the root problem. On-campus housing is the solution.

Some university officials have recently argued that, even if colleges provide housing for all their students and relieve the communities, the students would not live on campus. This is disingenuous.

A university can make on-campus residence a condition of admission, the choice of such admission to be freely chosen or declined. This requirement already is being applied to freshmen and sophomore students at some colleges, to their credit.

Both the mayor and the Office of Planning director have declared that universities should not be unreasonably restricted from expanding. Rather, they assert, future expansion should be done in nonimpacted, needful areas of the city. Need for "competitiveness" is the current, highly dubious justification for aggressive expansion of campuses and additional community impact. Georgetown University, however, already has successfully located its law school downtown. George Washington University has a satellite campus in the Reston area, which it is reportedly able to develop for ancillary commercial uses, too. This may be the solution, but neither the available draft campus plans nor the submitted Office of Planning recommendations reflect this.

On July 27, there will be a "roundtable" discussion sponsored by the Office of Planning-Zoning Commission with community leaders and others to discuss the pressing need for an overhaul of the District's vague and seemingly unenforceable zoning regulations, especially those that pertain to campus plan definitions and universities.

This being the case, the timing of the D.C. Board of Adjustment consideration of present 10-year campus plan proposals is crucial. It makes no sense to let two, three or four major decade-long plans slip through under defective old regulations if overhauling these is a priority.

Meanwhile, the 15 already-impacted neighborhoods still scramble, with their scant funds and part-time citizen help, to deal with professionally represented and ambitious universities.

Just when tax incentives and other factors have begun a welcome turnaround in many of our communities that abut universities, we cannot allow these private institutions to set back that progress with additional enrollments, plant expansion and other encroachment.

GUY GWYNNE
President
D.C. Federation of Citizens Associations
Washington

We welcome your opinions on any topic. Letters should be signed originals. Every letter will be considered for publication, but we prefer those of fewer than 250 words, typed double-spaced. All letters may be edited for clarity and length. Please include your name, address and daytime telephone number. Send your opinion to:

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