Public Welfare Foundation

funding a world of change

Testimony of

Larry Kressley
Executive Director

Before the

D.C. Board of Zoning Adjustment

Sheila Cross Reid
Chairperson

September 19, 2000

BZA
Case No. 16602
Exhibit No. 32

Board of Zoning Adjustment
District of Columbia
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Good afternoon Chairperson Reid and members of the Board. I am Larry Kressley, Executive Director of Public Welfare Foundation, and I am pleased to speak to you regarding our application now before the Board of Zoning Adjustment.

This application is an important step in the Public Welfare Foundation's efforts to restore the historic True Reformer Building to its status as a vibrant community landmark. Throughout this project we have worked closely with the neighborhood residents and elected officials in a collaborative effort, gathering their ideas and opinions and sharing our plans and our progress.

The True Reformer Building, one of the first in the nation to be designed, financed and built by the African American community, is a powerful symbol of perseverance, determination, and accomplishment in the face of great obstacles. Dedicated in 1903, the building was originally the home of the True Reformers, a benevolent organization dedicated to improving the lives of African Americans at the turn of the century, and later the home of the Metropolitan Police Boys Club and the First Separate Battalion, the black branch of the DC National Guard, and the site of concerts by Duke Ellington. Sadly, the True Reformer Building has been sitting empty and deteriorating for over 20 years.

Come January 2001, the True Reformer Building will again be home to community-building and neighborhood activities, and to the arts. Once renovation is completed, the building will serve as the headquarters of the Public Welfare Foundation. Founded in 1947 by newspaper publisher Charles Edward Marsh, the Foundation is committed to a strategy of service, advocacy and empowerment. Inherent in this strategy is the belief that people who are most affected by a

problem must be involved in developing solutions to address it. The Foundation distributes $18.5 million each year to groups in the U.S. and internationally. The Foundation supports a number of projects in Washington, DC, including a fund for Washington's Children and Youth, which distributed over $500,000 last year.

We plan to make a substantial portion of the True Reformer Building, including the original two-level auditorium, available for use by neighborhood groups and local non-profit organizations. We anticipate the building coming to life during the day and in the evening with community meetings and events, concerts, and other performances.

The continued use of the land immediately behind the building for parking will allow our staff to have secure, accessible parking and help to alleviate parking congestion in surrounding blocks. During our on-going discussions with the community about their hopes for this building and the surrounding neighborhood, we heard time and again the importance of bringing new daytime users into this community. By relocating our operations to the True Reformer Building, we will bring a daytime staff of over 30 to the U Street corridor. Our ability to do that is partially dependent upon providing those staff members with accessible parking.

Our work with the community on this project began well before construction was underway and at no time in our public meetings did residents express concerns about our use of the lots directly behind the building for parking. Both the ANC and the Cardozo-Shaw Neighborhood Association passed unanimous resolutions in support of the project and our application for tax-exempt revenue bonds. Ward 1 Councilmember Jim Graham, ANC Chair Laurence Guyot, and ANC Vice Chair Glenn Melcher, who will be our ANC Commissioner, have all been active

participants in the community process and supporters of the renovation of True Reformer Building as our headquarters.

In addition to the accessory parking site immediately to the south of the True Reformer Building, the property as we acquired it includes additional land in the interior of the square. These lots were approved some years ago for development of a parking lot that was never built. Once the site of alley dwellings, this land has stood empty for many years, serving as an ad hoc parking lot and garbage dump. If the instant application is approved, we will not need this land for parking and would like to devote it to more useful and compatible uses. We held several community meetings to discuss the project and gather community opinions and also conducted a survey of residents about their preferences for the use of this land. An overview of our community outreach activities and the results of the survey are included in your information packets.

After an extensive community process, our board of directors recently decided to pursue a development plan with MANNA Community Development Corporation. Under that plan MANNA CDC will develop 12 affordable housing units and a park, both uses that received strong community support in our meetings and survey.

Once again, Madame Chairperson and Members of the Board, thank you for your consideration of our Application.