CAPITOL HILL RESTORATION SOCIETY
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BZA No. 16648
300-332 H Street, NE
Square 776, Lots 9, 25-27, 29, 51-53, 800, 814-819, and 821
Zone: C-2-A

March 19, 2001

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2001 MAR 19 PM 12: 40

Board of Zoning Adjustment,
Room 210
441 4th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001

We recommend that this application be DENIED.

Only denial seems likely to promote a fundamental re-evaluation of the project consistent with sound urban development principles, the recommendation of the Office of Planning, and the principles set out by the community in its January 10 response to the BZA's request that it provide Amoco with consolidated community comments.

Background

A medium density Community Business District (zoned C-2-A) extends along H Street, NE from Second Street eastward nearly to Fourteenth Street. Heavily damaged in civil disturbances in 1968, H Street has been depressed ever since. Now, with new interest in development north of Union Station, and with a new Metro station under construction at Florida and New York Avenues, the stage seems set for redevelopment.

In September, Amoco proposed a gasoline service station, a store/foodmart, and a car wash on a site extending along H Street from Third to Fourth Streets (300-332 H Street, NE). At hearing in December, neighborhood concerns about the large size of the station and its incompatibility with the surrounding urban neighborhood led the Board to postpone the hearing to allow Amoco and the community to work out their differences. That exercise has not been entirely successful.

Amoco's Supplemental Statement of March 20 presents their revised application, but the revisions do not satisfy either the Office of Planning or the community. In the revised application, the gasoline service station and the store/foodmart are now restricted to Lot 53, which extends from Third Street to the central North-South alley. The site is still large; lot 53 contains nearly 36,000 square feet, six times larger than the modest 5,760 square foot station that Amoco had operated for many years on a portion of lot 53. It is, however, about two-thirds of the size of the project proposed in September. The buildings on lot 53 have been razed, as have the buildings east of the alley with exception of No.

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EXHIBIT NO.109

316. The now vacant lots east of the alley are secured only by temporary fencing and they are already beginning to be used as dump sites.

Land use and city planning issues

We are concerned because the project will occupy a highly visible location. A high overpass that carries H Street across the railroad tracks north of Union Station is just to the west of the site. The 300 block of H Street is often, and rightfully, described as the "gateway" to the H Street business district for those traveling eastward on the overpass. A block that is of that prominence should feature buildings that encourage development elsewhere along the street. The proposed Amoco station will not.

We believe that the Office of Planning correctly applied provisions of the Comprehensive Plan to this application. Section 726 of the Zoning Regulations, which allows the Board to grant special exceptions to permit enlargement of gasoline service stations, requires those applications to be referred to the Office of Planning. A number of Comprehensive Plan provisions are quoted in the Office of Planning report dated December 11, 2000, some of them general in nature, some as specific as the Ward 6 land use objective of preventing the establishment of "service stations with twenty-four hour convenience stores." (Comprehensive Plan Amendment Act of 1998, Section 1735.1.) The Office of Planning report concludes that this application still does not meet the goals expressed in the Comprehensive Plan.

We believe that H Street would benefit from the objective standards of a zoning overlay to implement the more subjective standards of the Comprehensive Plan. The Office of Planning should designate H Street, NE from North Capitol Street to Bladensburg Road a special treatment area with the goal of establishing an overlay zone as provided in Sec. 1735.1(w)(1), Comprehensive Plan Amendment Act of 1998. It is important to establish an overlay that will treat the special character and needs of H Street as a totality. Furthermore, we believe that it would be appropriate to declare a moratorium on demolition of buildings along H Street, except for those declared a threat to public safety, in order to prevent further loss of buildings and land before an overlay can be put in place.

What needs to be done?

The question is how redevelopment of H Street can best be encouraged. We think that there is a good chance to reach an agreement but the history of interaction on this matter suggests strongly that only beginning from scratch will promote the reevaluation necessary. We suggest consideration of the following:

- The Board should deny this application, making it clear that further tinkering with the present layout is inadequate to address the concerns put forward by the Office of Planning and the community.

- Amoco should consult with the Office of Planning and the community to better fit the station to the urban nature of the site.

- The Office of Planning should begin necessary steps to establish a zoning overlay for all of H Street.

- The community is rightfully concerned about future development on the portion of the original site east of the alley (Nos. 316-332, H Street). Amoco also should develop plans for this property in consultation with the Office of Planning and the community.

- The neighbors also are rightfully concerned about illegal dumping, some of which has already started, on the lots east of the alley (Nos. 316-332). Amoco should promptly fence the property to prevent dumping while the future of the lots is being settled.

We are pleased to submit these views for your consideration.

Lyle R. Schauer
Zoning Committee Chair