704 Eighth Street, NE
Washington, DC

November 28, 2000

Board of Zoning Adjustment
441 4th Street, NW, Suite 210
Washington, D.C. 20001

16648

RE: Application #16648

Dear Members of the Board:

I am a resident of Northeast Washington, a place that I care about very much. I moved to the city to escape the maddening chaos that the car-dependent suburbs have become, for a simpler life where I can walk to work, stores, restaurants, and services. I think many of the people that live around me share a similar view. A true city is a web of neighborhoods, each self-sustaining and full of life, interconnected by sidewalks, streets, bus lines, subways, and parks. Washington offers much in the way of a well-planned urban design, with beautiful vistas, plentiful green space, and an efficient grid system. In short, Washington is a city, a place that should not welcome elements of the suburban style of development that detract from such a good design.

The proposal from BP Amoco to expand its property at 3rd and H streets, NE, is such a development. In the many community meetings that I have attended regarding this proposal, I have seen nothing from the engineer, Mr. Dan Duke, of Bohler Engineering in Sterling, VA, that suggests he understands or appreciates the kind of development that is appropriate or sensible for this urban parcel. I have written to Mr. Duke regarding the plans that he has forwarded on behalf of BP Amoco, with suggestions for improving this design. My suggestions included reconfiguring the plan so that the retail element of the project faces the street (not buried behind the pumping islands) to accommodate the residents of the community. I prevailed upon Mr. Duke to consider a plan to restore the historic façades of the storefronts in the 300 block of H Street to create the retail space the company seeks to include. (Other than a reply thanking me for my letter, I have not received a substantive response from Mr. Duke, Bohler Engineering, BP Amoco, or others regarding this letter.)

As the project stands, there is not a single aspect of the design that merits acceptance in an urban context. One would hope that this kind of design would be relegated to the side of a highway. The lawyers representing BP Amoco have maintained that the benefits to the community are greater than any inconveniences the nearby residents may endure. Frankly, I do not see how a suburban gas station a full city block in size is going to improve our community. Certainly, this kind of development will not increase the attractiveness of the H Street corridor and help to spur new growth. Rather, it will merely help to degrade the prospects for both sides of H Street in this block and reduce the visual impact further as one approaches the neighborhood from another physical and mental barrier, the bridge over the rail yard.

Our community is looking for ways to make H Street a destination, not a thruway—a place where families stop to shop, eat, attend civic and social events, and enjoy things that we have yet to even imagine. While we recognize that BP Amoco now owns, and therefore, "controls", the parcel of

BZA
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property in question, we believe that it is the responsibility of the city's various regulatory agencies to ensure that crucial piece of commercial property is developed in a responsible, and appropriate manner. I urge the members of the Board of Zoning Adjustment to deny any variances that would enable BP Amoco to carry out their plans as they stand. This includes allowing the closing of public alleys, additional curb cuts along H Street, demolition of the historic properties in the square, and any other measures that would enable this plan to be realized.

I urge you to work with the other agencies within the city government—Historic Preservation Review Board, DCRA, and Office of Zoning—to provide consistent, clear guidance to BP Amoco as to what the city will allow and accept at this site. Thorough communication between these agencies and, especially, with the community, during this process is tantamount to establishing a process that will ultimately result in a win for everyone involved.

The fact is that it is possible, and moreover potentially more profitable, for BP Amoco to design a mixed-use site that incorporates the historic structures, brings the retail forward, scales down the service station, and still functions as a perfectly healthy block in an urban neighborhood. The attorneys and planners working for BP Amoco do not seem to see it this way. It is incumbent upon the community and the city to help them see differently. I urge you to read Mary Vogel's letter regarding two potential visions for this parcel and the street at large for further evidence.

I am aware of the BZA's hearing regarding this proposal scheduled for December 19 at 9:30 am, and I plan to attend. Please let me know if there are additional steps available—to me and my community—to provide input and guidance regarding this process. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Respectfully,

Kevin M Palmer

Kevin Palmer

Enclosures

Letter to Mr. Dan Duke of Bohler Engineering
Letter from Ms. Mary Vogel of Washington, DC

Cc:
Office of Councilmember Sharon Ambrose
DC Office of Planning
DC Office of Zoning
Advisory Neighborhood Commission 6A

Mr. Dan Duke
Bohler Engineering

Mr. Duke:

We have not formally met, but I've attended two meetings in which you've discussed your design proposals for the expansion of the BP-Amoco site on H Street, NE in Washington, DC. As you have probably surmised, this project is perceived by the community as a critical piece in the larger issue of redevelopment of the entire corridor. To give you a little background, the neighborhood in which your client proposes to build is keenly interested in shedding the years of disinvestment since its physical demise in the 1968 riots here. The community is well aware of the problems that this dearth of activity has helped to breed—drug trafficking, abuse, crime, and a general feeling of insolence when walking the corridor.

As you have seen by the active nature of the meetings which your client has agreed to hold with the community, we are very interested in what happens along this important commercial corridor. Many of us have dreams of a day when we can walk to a grocery store, gym, coffee shop, dentist, doctor's office, pizza joint, quality restaurant, daycare center, and so on. Urban neighborhoods are a collection of people with the like desire for community—often the exact opposite of what has been realized in the suburbs. We are not dependent on cars in the city. The majority of folks only own cars to enable travel to places beyond the city, or to haul groceries since full-service groceries are hard to come by in many areas of the city. But that is changing.

My point is that what the people in this community are looking for is a way to develop opportunities that serve the people of this community, not the suburban commuters that ravage our neighborhood streets on a daily basis. One neighbor of mine commented last night, "I want people from Maryland to want to stop and have dinner on H Street, not merely stop for gas, pump up, and drive on." Your current proposal offers the neighborhood very little in the way of a local-serving commercial style of development, while making every effort at convenience to the automobile user, the majority of whom will not be from the local community.

While the majority of the community recognizes that BP-Amoco now "controls" (as Mr. Rachal is so fond of saying) the nearly-full-block of 3rd, 4th, H, and I Streets, NE, and that further development of the property is inevitable, we are trying to impress upon you and your client that the best thing you can do for the project is to propose a responsible, sensible design. One that marries the goals BP-Amoco has with good urban planning principles. This is a city neighborhood and regardless of the design of the canopy you propose, stretching such a thing for a city block—particularly in the context of the magnitude that this corner represents as the entrance to the neighborhood—is inappropriate and insensitive.

There are many workable solutions to the problem, some of which will offer a greater design challenge for you and greater costs to your client. However, an easy case can be made that the better your investment, the better the return will be. In this case, one alternative that BP-Amoco and yourself have not seemed to consider is the potential for retaining the historic character of the street through restoration of the existing structures and conversion to your much-hyped mini-mart. With the addition of new construction behind these historic fa*ades, you could surely grow the mini-mart beyond 7,000 square feet. If BP-Amoco's stated mission is to be something more than a petroleum company, perhaps they could show the community real investment by partnering with a named retailer—say a Kinko's—to provide a real service to the community in a portion of the newly created retail space.

Removing the mini-mart from behind the gas islands would open up new space in that part of the parcel and placing the retail at the front of the parcel (at the egress with the sidewalk) would certainly improve pedestrian access. No matter how many crosswalks you install, any instance where a car and pedestrian must compete for real estate, there will be conflict (just follow any of the stories in the past few years of pedestrians in suburban neighborhoods like Rockville, where it seems they lose at least one trying to cross the Pike a week).

In short, Mr. Duke, there are many possibilities that BP-Amoco could consider that your direction could help to persuade. The community will not rest until it is made to feel like a partner in the development of it. Too often large corporations take the stance that a community should "like it or leave it." That may be easy to do in the suburbs, where few people will really be impacted by an insensitive design, but in the city, people matter. Pedestrians matter. Cars are a nuisance, a source of pollution and asthma, and a scourge on the landscape.

I would like to assist you and your client in getting the facts about your project before the community by putting together a space on a website for people to review the plans, make suggestions and comments about them, and learn about the process and steps that the company is taking to do the right thing. If you are willing to cooperate, I think the process could go much more smoothly and you could find that BP-Amoco comes out smelling like a rose and respected for the positive message it sends to the community, rather than the perception it currently enjoys as a poor corporate neighbor.

Please feel free to call me at 202 366-6848 or e-mail me at kevpalm@erols.com. I look forward to working with you to make the expansion of this important site one that BP-Amoco and the community at large can be proud of.

Thanks for your time.

Regards,

Kevin Palmer
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Washington, DC
kevpalm@erols.com