STATEMENT OF HIS EXCELLENCY AIVIS RONIS,
AMBASSADOR OF THE REPUBLIC OF LATVIA,
TO THE FOREIGN MISSIONS BOARD OF ZONING ADJUSTMENT

September 25, 2001

Good morning, Honorable Members of the Board. My name is Aivis Ronis, and I am Ambassador of the Republic of Latvia to the United States of America. It is my pleasure to speak to you this morning regarding our application to relocate a part of our chancery from our present location at 4325 – 17th Street, N.W., to 2306 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W. I know that you have received our Statement, so I will not repeat all of that information for you. However, I would like to address certain of the issues that have been raised about our application, and to assure you that we have every intention of being a good neighbor in our new building. We have been at our present location for approximately 50 years. We have had good relations with our existing neighbors, and we fully intend to be good neighbors at our new location.

We are pleased to have obtained the support of the Department of State, the Office of Planning, the D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board, the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, and the D.C. Division of Transportation, and we would be pleased to receive your support as well.

You have already received a letter from the Department of State indicating that our application meets the three federal criteria in the Foreign Missions Act, namely, the international obligation of the United States, the adequacy of federal

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protection, and the federal interest of the United States. I understand that a representative of the Department of State is here today and will address those issues.

We are a small chancery, and we will not become a burden on the neighborhood. We will have up to 12 people at the new chancery, including up to 7 diplomats and 3 non-diplomatic staff, plus two others who will be the caretaker and the driver who will live there. Three staff members will remain at our existing building, which we will retain for our Defense Attache, Archives and Technical Facilities. Our hours of operation will be 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The number of visitors to our new chancery will be extremely small. We estimate, based upon experience, that we will have approximately 2 visitors per day for visa and consular purposes, and 2 other visitors per month for other official business. We have kept a careful record of all visitors, and these figures have been verified. We conduct most of our business by mail, telephone, facsimile and messenger. Most of our visitors use taxis and we expect that this will continue.

With regard to historic preservation, we understand that the building is a historic landmark, including the first two floors of the inside of the building. We have every intention of maintaining the property in accord with its historic status. Our capital city, Riga, recently celebrated its 800th anniversary, and many of our government buildings in the city are historic and much older than this building. We have extensive experience with historic preservation. We believe that historic buildings add to the charm of both our capital city and yours. Our request to the

Historic Preservation Review Board for two small signs on the front of the building was approved. This approval also included the retention and relocation of the existing sign placed on the building by the Smithsonian Museum, identifying the building. We have no intention of constructing a security fence around the front of the building, or installing intrusive cameras or antennas on the building. I am fully aware of the requirement to obtain historic preservation approvals before we begin any repair or restoration work to the outside of our property, and to the first two floors of the interior, and we will do that.

With regard to parking and transportation, our plan is described for you in our Statement. We will have 7 diplomatic, and 3 non-diplomatic staff, plus a couple who will live on site to act as caretaker and driver. We will have up to 7 cars at the new chancery on a regular basis, and all will be parked in our driveway. Only 2 of those cars will be needed on a regular basis during the day, and we can easily obtain access to them. We have not requested diplomatic parking privileges on Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., and will not do so, because we believe that this is not necessary for our needs.

Our new building is in the heart of Embassy Row and is surrounded by other Embassy buildings. We believe that this is an appropriate location for our chancery. There are many other chanceries and diplomatic missions in the surrounding neighborhood.

We have had several meetings to discuss our plans and to assure all concerned that we intend to be respectful of the neighborhood and our new

neighbors. Our representatives met with Ms. Brown-Roberts of the Office of Planning on July 26th and again on August 21st, and had very good meetings. They reviewed our proposal with her, and answered all of her questions.

On May 21st and again on June 14th, Embassy staff invited representatives of the neighborhood to meet at the new location, where we described our proposal in detail. Our representatives also made a presentation to the Advisory Neighborhood Commission on June 19th. We agreed to request a postponement of this hearing from September 11th to today's date, in order to give the ANC another opportunity to consider our application. At the June ANC meeting, we were told that the neighborhood was forming a Task Force, to be comprised of all interested groups and individuals, to address our application. We offered to develop and send to the ANC a list of conditions for consideration by the Task Force, which we would agree to impose upon ourselves, in order to address their concerns. We understand that the Task Force did not take any action on our list of conditions. We met again with the Advisory Neighborhood Commission on September 18th, at which time they voted to oppose our application. I note for the record that, when the topic of our chancery was discussed at the recent meeting last week, there were only seven residents of the community in attendance, and two of them spoke in favor of our application.

We understand that there is a concern that the Embassy of Latvia will not live up to its commitments. The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, to which Latvia is a party, is an international treaty which governs the conduct of

foreign missions and members of those missions in host countries. Article 41 of the Vienna Convention states that . . . "it is the duty of all persons enjoying . . . privileges and immunities to respect the laws and regulations of the receiving State." This imposes an obligation upon us to comply with the laws and regulations of both the United States and the District of Columbia. We take this obligation very seriously.

In conclusion, I assure you that we will be very respectful of the neighborhood, and we will honor our promises and commitments made to you today. My country is a strong and stable democracy, and we value our relationship with the United States. Once again, on behalf of my government and my country, I would like to assure you that the Latvian chancery at 2306 Massachusetts Avenue will be well kept and well maintained, according to law, and that we will be good neighbors. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you this morning.

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