Testimony: Board of Zoning Adjustment
Re: BZA Application Number 16833
February 12, 2001
Variance for Mixed Use Project at 306 Carroll Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C.

I would like to thank the Board for the opportunity to present comment in support of this mixed-use project at 306 Carroll Street, N.W. I am Frances E. Phipps, and am speaking today not only as the owner and restorer of the Cady-Lee Mansion, a D. C. listed historic landmark on the National Register of Historic Places, but also as the President of The Phipps Group, an awarding-winning land-use and economic development firm which has studied this area for over twenty years. I am testifying in support of the variances requested regarding roof structures and residential recreational space for this project.

Importance of this Project to the Community:

This vacant and blighted site is located at a critical juncture in the Takoma commercial corridor. It is directly across from the Takoma Metro Station entrance and adjacent to the entry to the Metro overpass – which since its construction in the early 1970's has acted as a physical and psychological barrier between the eastern and western segments of the Carroll Avenue retail area. This overpass has long been a severe impediment to retail continuity between the two Takomas.

Indeed, one of the major challenges faced by the recent revitalization small area planning effort was to identify strategies that would begin to reduce this barrier effect and to create a continuous commercial corridor along Carroll Avenue. The proposed development at 306 Carroll Avenue, one of the five priority redevelopment sites identified by the Takoma Central District Plan, responds directly to this difficult challenge.

To achieve the plan's goals and in response to community desires, the developer is providing street level retail in the project, thus creating a pedestrian friendly connection along Carroll and providing a retail linkage between Fourth Street on the west and Carroll and Laurel to the east. To accomplish this, he has voluntarily reduced his building depth, and thus the leaseable square footage, at the street frontage in order to increase the width of the sidewalk for pedestrians – a public amenity for which he is to be commended.

In terms of residential development, this project represents the type of creative, innovative "green" approach to design and construction which is certain to appeal to those who specifically seek out Takoma as their community. In spite of the site's odd configuration, Mr. Katz in his design has been able to provide the project with the type of high quality, creative amenities such as interior courtyards, balconies, and interior sunlight which are so important to marketability and sustainability of a residential project in this highly urban setting.

16833
36

Difficulties Presented by the Site:

With regard to the difficulties presented by the site, I would like to applaud and second the Office of Planning's analysis of the unusual and complex physical constraints of this site. The development difficulties posed by the odd shaped configuration of the site's footprint is matched and magnified by a substantial change in grade on the site. Combined, these two factors guarantee enormous site preparation costs as well as design challenges. It has been precisely these constraints, in conjunction with the site's proximity to the railroad, which have discouraged private investment in this location for the past two decades.

To put this in context, over twenty years ago my firm had just completed a planning study of this area when a developer offered a contingent contract on this property. The community was excited. Metro was soon to

Board of Zoning Adjustment
District of Columbia
CASE NO.16833
EXHIBIT NO.36

arrive and we had visions of an active, vigorous main street. However, once the developer assessed the difficulties of the site and was faced with the remarkable interest of the citizens, he withdrew his offer. In contrast to this example, for the past nine months Mr. Katz has been meeting and working with community representatives and making revisions to his design to incorporate community concerns.

Location of the Metropolitan Branch Bike Trail:

I would like to also address the issue of the possible location of the Metropolitan Branch Bike Trail which was mentioned in the Office of Planning report. There are currently four (4) potential bike trail alignments proposed for the Takoma area, so the elimination of one potential alignment does not jeopardize the provision of this public improvement to the community. As a matter of fact, the developer who is currently designing a new development project - the Takoma Metro Condominiums – located diagonally across from the Katz site - has voluntarily incorporated a western alignment of the bike path into his proposed plans.

The eastern alignment raises several formidable problems that the others don't. This alignment - as it was described to me in September, 2000 by its designer – is essentially an elevated steel throughway, 15 feet wide, approximately ¼ mile long, composed of two bridges – one over Piney Branch Road and one over Carroll Ave and an elongated steel cage attached to the Metro retaining wall for the length of Eastern Avenue. Substantial engineering and liability issues are probable.

- The bridge over Piney Branch Road is proposed to be hung from the CSX bridge.
- The elevated, 15 foot wide caged structure, is proposed to be suspended from the Metro retaining wall by steel girders which will need to penetrate the retaining wall at regular intervals for 3/10th of a mile. The elevated segment will vary in height from a low of 5 feet $\pm$ to a high of approximately 25/28 feet $\pm$.
- The bridge over Carroll Avenue has not yet been described.

In addition to impacting the Katz development, the eastern alignment will also traverse two National Park Service properties; block the existing CSX maintenance access gate; go behind a National Register Historic Property; go through the back yards of 115 existing residential units; cut through the new proposed Metro parking structure and impact the 70-90 townhouse units proposed for the Metro site.

None of the other three possible alignments face impediments such as these. No financial or engineering data for this proposal have been analyzed. Costs for construction of the entire D.C. 6.5 mile bike trail have been estimated at $5.9 million in the Metropolitan Branch Trail *Concept Plan* (p.34). These estimates may be outdated as, within the last 90 days Montgomery County has developed a preliminary cost estimate for its proposed bike/pedestrian bridge over Georgia Avenue at $5.5 million. This bridge is only slightly wider than the one proposed for Piney Branch Road.

Conclusion:

The proposed development of 306 Carroll Avenue represents a long-awaited mixed-use project, in a priority site location, which is responsive to community concerns, consistent with the recommendations of the Takoma Central District Plan, endorsed by ANC-4B, Plan Takoma and Historic Takoma. The minor variances being requested have been supported by the Office of Planning, the Historic Preservation Review Board and the above mentioned community groups.

Such unanimity may be usual in other jurisdictions, but in Takoma, it is extraordinary. This represents a significant consensus in a community known for its dissent. The process itself, the hard won consensus and the redesigned project represent a substantial contribution to the public good. For all of these reasons, I urge your approval of the requested variances.