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April 8, 2002

District of Columbia
Board of Zoning Adjustment
Office of Zoning
441 4th Street NW
Suite 210-S
Washington, D.C. 20001

Re: BZA Application No. 16852; St. Patrick's School

Dear Members of the Board of Zoning Adjustment:

I respectfully submit comments in the referenced application as a concerned resident of Northwest Washington and as a parent of school-aged children. I am not affiliated with St. Patrick's school, but rather a neighbor of the site. I understand St. Partick's must gain BZA approval of their proposed addition of a 7th and 8th grades at the MacArthur Blvd./Ashby Street building. **There are very significant issues that the BZA should consider in their evaluation of this application. The primary of these issues is that there is currently a severe shortage of elementary, middle and high schools in our Northwest D.C. neighborhoods.** The opponents of this application suggest that the addition of St. Patrick's middle school will ruin the quiet residential nature of Ashby Street and our neighborhood. Northwest Washington is a diverse residential community with lovely neighborhoods. The one thing many of our families with school-aged children have in common is that we have to send our children to school! Many of us would like to send our children to school in our neighborhood. Currently, there are very limited public and private school options for our children. This letter is an attempt to outline the realities that parents are facing with respect to school choices. While I understand some of the immediate neighbors objections "of not in my backyard", then where do we locate our neighborhood schools? Schools are an important part of the residential zone plan. **The concerns of a few neighbors should not outweigh the needs of the neighborhood as a whole. Accordingly, I urge the BZA to support not only St. Patrick's middle school, but also, to actively foster other institutions which would provide educational options for our children in D.C. neighborhoods.**

Do We Really Need More Elementary/Middle Schools in Northwest Washington?

My husband I send our three children (ages 8, 7, and 5) to Horace Mann, our neighborhood D.C. public elementary school. We initially chose Horace Mann because of convenience and with the idea that all of our children's playmates would be in our neighborhood. **After September 11th, however, we now realize the true necessity of sending our children to school in close proximity to our home. If we can not find a**

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quality middle school for our children in our neighborhood, we will be forced to move from Northwest Washington. This is a reality that many parents in our neighborhood face.

Our public elementary school, Horace Mann, provides a quality education for our children. However, it is financially supplemented to a large degree by the parents. This year alone our family contributed more than $4,000.00 to the PTA. The financial supplement provided by the Horace Mann parents doesn't pay for extras; it provides basic operating support for the school and materials like paper, pencils and art supplies. Our parent body has been informed that as of next year, the school budget will be cut by 20% because of the financial crisis in the D.C. school system. Horace Mann will not be able to provide the same quality education it currently provides under those financial restrictions. Some classes next year may be as large as 35 students may.

The D.C. public middle school that our neighborhood must use is Hardy Middle School in Georgetown. While Hardy is slated for renovation in the next five years, its current physical plant is seriously dilapidated. Recently, the school had to be closed for several days because the bathrooms didn't work. But it is not just the physical plant of the school that is disturbing. The Hardy principal gave a presentation to the Horace Mann parents and proudly provided us with the statistic that 51% of the Hardy students scored above basic on the standardized tests. In other words, almost half of the students at this middle school scored below basic on this test. Most Horace Mann parents do not feel that this is an acceptable educational option for their children.

The problem that confronts our family, as well as many other families with school age children, is that we want to live in the District not only to cut commuting time to our jobs, but also to avail ourselves of the wealth of opportunities that living in our Nation's Capitol provides us. But, we have to be able to educate our children. **Several neighbors were quoted in the Northwest Current as stating that "the shortage in schools is bogus." Clearly, these individuals do not have school-age children to educate. The shortage is very real. At the present time, the D.C. public school system, even for top performing schools, like Horace Mann, is in a terrible state. This leaves neighborhood parents with only private and church sponsored schools in our area.**

A key problem is that there are so few of these schools that it is more competitive to get into these schools than most colleges. This seems to be particularly true for grades 7 and 8. The application process for both parents and children is difficult; with so few spots, private schools can be highly selective in their acceptance. Unless your child is at the top of his/her class, then it is unlikely that he/she will secure a spot. Many schools boast more than two hundred applications to fill a class of twenty. Only the most selective colleges can claim similar admissions statistics. In an effort to get into one of these schools, many children are having to spend all their after school time with tutors or in prep programs. **The reality is that there is a very real need for additional school programs in our area.**

Will St. Patrick's addition of 7th and 8th grades (a total of 60 spots) solve the problem? Certainly not. But, such a program would provide an additional 30 spots per grade in 7th and 8th that did not exist last year and help the placement process somewhat. Many of my neighbors and I hope that you will not only approve the St. Patrick's application, but actively facilitate the process for the creation of other educational options for our children.

Given the serious need in our community for a program like that proposed by St. Patrick's, many of my neighbors and I attended the ANC meetings to better understand the opposition to the proposal. While there was a lot of legal discussion about the zoning code and the burden of proof, many of the issues and objections raised by the immediately affected neighbors are really common sense based. The following provides my opinion, and that of many of my neighbors, on the subjects of traffic, noise, privacy and property value issues raised at the ANC meeting. We hope this is helpful to you in your evaluation of the St Patrick's proposal.

Issue One: Traffic

It is my understanding from the ANC meetings that the immediate neighbors object to the two a.m./p.m. shuttle bus system that St Patrick's has offered on the basis that it creates undue traffic congestion on Ashby Street and MacArthur Blvd. **The reality is that numerous large yellow school buses roll through my street (and the rest of our neighborhood) twice (sometimes three times) a day ferrying neighborhood children to various schools in Bethesda, McLean, Potomac and Northwest D.C. In one day alone, on my street, I have counted as many as twelve large school busses from different schools. (Usually the name of the school is identified on the bus.)** Many of these neighborhood children have as much as an hour bus ride to and from school. For example, the Potomac School bus arrives on my corner at 6:50 a.m. Many of these school buses do not deposit the children until well after 5:00 p.m. This should indicate to the BZA that the addition of the St Patrick's shuttle buses would not appreciably increase the already existing school bus traffic in our neighborhood, in general. Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that most parents would not opt to put their elementary school children in transit to and from school for upwards of two hours a day if they felt that they had reasonable educational options in their neighborhood.

Issue Two: Noise

The opposition neighbors also cited the assumed noise from the St Patrick's middle school children as a primary reason for their opposition to St Patrick's sixth and seventh grade. The reality is that other than the short time during recess/lunch, it is unlikely that there will be any appreciable noise from the facility. When I go to my children's elementary school of 225 children, I am often struck how quiet and orderly the school is when school is in session. I only wish that my children were as quite, respectful and obedient at home. I can only assume that middle school children make appreciable less noise than kindergartners. The noise level at the Horace Mann playground does

increase somewhat after school. It is my understanding, however, that the proposed St. Patrick's site will not have playing fields or a large playground. Moreover, as the proposed site faces a major thoroughfare, MacArthur Blvd., I imagine that the noise of the car and truck traffic will muffle significantly the middle school children's voices.

Clearly, as a mother of three children, I personally do not find the sound of children's voices objectionable or noise pollution under most circumstances. But even from a less biased perspective, however, it seems unlikely that the noise from the proposed St. Patrick's middle school would be appreciably more significant than its prior commercial use or any other future commercial use.

Additionally, Northwest Washington is a multifaceted residential neighborhood composed of residents of diverse ages and ethnic backgrounds. We do not live in seniors or a singles, or religious community that would impose certain noise restrictions upon residents. Children's voices are an integral part of the fabric of our community and our neighborhoods.

I hope that the BZA will view the evidence and determine, on an objective basis, whether, in reality, the noise from the proposed St. Patrick's middle school children truly would be as significant or as objectionable as the Ashby Street neighbors allege and so burdensome to individual homeowners that it warrants denying the St. Patrick's application.

Issue Three: Privacy and Property Values

Last, the opposing neighbors cited issues of residential privacy and a reduction in their property values as reasons for their opposition to the St Patrick's application. While I can appreciate their concerns about their privacy and property values, I hope that the BZA will also evaluate this evidence on an objective basis.

I listened to the neighbors concerns about their privacy during the ANC meetings. Initially, I was quite empathic to their concerns. At that point, however, I had not seen the proposed site. Needless to say, I was quite shocked to find out that the proposed site is a large dilapidated Victorian building facing MacArthur Blvd. on a large piece of land set off to some degree from the two abutting houses. It apparently has been used in a commercial capacity since the 1940's. The reality of the layout was quite different, in my judgment, than the situation portrayed by the opposing neighbors at the ANC meetings. Although, the two immediately abutting neighbors may have a reasonable privacy concern, it is something that may well be dealt with through effective landscaping or other similar means. The privacy of the immediate Ashby Street neighborhood as a whole does not appear to be affected to the degree the neighbors allege. Also, would not the immediate neighbors have similar privacy concerns for any proposed use of the building unless it was strictly used as a single-family dwelling? I urge the BZA to view objectively the evidence on this issue.

The Ashby Street neighbors also allege that the St. Patrick's middle school would reduce significantly their property values. I am not qualified to assess the validity of the claim. I do know, however, that my property value and those of my neighbors are significantly impacted by the paucity of educational opportunities, whether public, private or church based for elementary and middle school children. Who would be willing to buy my 4-bedroom home with a kitchen circa 1927? Clearly, the mostly likely

prospective buyer will be a family with school aged children who want to minimize their commuting time to work. The available elementary schools will make a difference to this prospective buyer. As stated earlier, if I can not find reasonable local schools for my children, my family will be forced to move out of the District.

In its consideration of the St Patrick's issue, or any other elementary, middle or high school, the BZA needs to evaluate the residential zone plan for Northwest Washington and address the needs of all the residents of our neighborhood.

Issue Four: ANC Meetings on St. Patrick's

Many of my neighbors and I attended two of the three ANC meetings on the St. Patrick's issue. Additionally, I spoke with several of the ANC Commissioners about my concerns. As an outsider, I was truly appalled and perplexed at the negative tenor of the meetings. From my perspective, and that of many of my neighbors, the role of the local ANC is to protect individual neighbor's rights, but in a balanced and objective manner and in the context of what is right for our neighborhood as a whole. Moreover, I thought that the ANC should also seek to find solutions to the affected neighbors concerns and facilitate a compromise, not only for this particular situation, but also for any elementary school proposals that arise in the future.

I spoke with John Finney following the second ANC meeting and told him of my concerns (and those of many Horace Mann parents) about the intense need in our neighborhood for elementary and middle schools. I also explained that we, as a group, would be willing to demonstrate our concern with a signed petition urging the BZA and the ANC to encourage the creation of more educational opportunities, public, private, or church-based in our neighborhood. While he appeared interested, he never let the petition be presented at the last ANC meeting. At this meeting, I got the sense that the ANC vote in opposition to St Patrick's was a pre-determined conclusion, even though the Palisades Citizen's Association had voted in favor of the proposal the night before.

I can only hope that the BZA will objectively view the evidence and render a reasonable and workable decision for the immediately affected Ashby Street neighbors, as well as for our neighborhood as a whole.

Conclusion

I hope that the Board finds these comments useful in its determination of not only the St. Partick's proposed middle school, but any similar elementary school proposal in the future. Many of our Horace Mann Elementary School and neighborhood parents join me in urging the Board to approve St. Patrick's proposed middle school at the Ashby Street site.

Sincerely,



M. Christina Carter-Pena