

Historic Takoma, Inc.

"Preserving the Heritage of Takoma Park-MD and Takoma-DC"

Testimony of Historic Takoma, Inc.
For the DC Board of Zoning Adjustment
Presented by Bonnie Moss
Co-Chair, Takoma DC Historic Preservation Committee
June 11, 2002
Re: BZA Application Number 16878
7064 Eastern Avenue, NW, Washington, DC

I am Bonnie Moss, Board Member of Historic Takoma, Inc. and co-chair of its Takoma DC Historic Preservation Committee. I reside at 6825 Piney Branch Rd., NW. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Historic Takoma, Inc. is a membership-based nonprofit organization founded in 1979 to promote historic preservation, citizen involvement, and community development for the Takoma community in Washington, DC and Takoma Park, MD.

Significance of the Property

The Cady-Lee Mansion is the most historically significant property in Takoma, DC. The house, a Queen Anne Victorian, was built in 1887 and designed by Leon Dessez, who also designed the house that is now the official residence of the Vice President. The mansion was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1975 and remains the only individually listed property on the National Register in Ward 4.

In recent years, Historic Takoma was obliged to watch the house deteriorate under the ownership of an individual who clearly lacked the means to make necessary repairs. We were therefore extremely heartened when, last year, Frances Phipps purchased the house and undertook an extensive and meticulous restoration.

Position of Historic Takoma

Upon the purchase of the Cady-Lee by the Forum for Youth Investment, Historic Takoma felt it was incumbent upon us to examine closely the issues involved in the nonprofit exemption required for the Forum to occupy the Cady-Lee.

On May 9, 2002, members of the Board of Directors of Historic Takoma met with Karen Pittman and Merita Irby, Executive Director and Deputy Director, respectively, of the Forum for Youth Investment. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the requirements for the nonprofit zoning exemption, and how best to ensure the preservation of the mansion.

The Board members of Historic Takoma were delighted to find that our appreciation for the Cady-Lee, and our concerns for its continued preservation in its current state, are matched by the views of the Forum. They shared our interest in ensuring that changes will be carried out in a manner that does as much as possible to preserve the historic quality of the mansion and its setting. We were especially encouraged to learn that the Forum has sought out experts in historic preservation to carry out the needed

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alterations and researched the most preservation-friendly alternatives for making needed fire safety and other accommodations.

It was a great relief to us also that the Forum does not plan to add a large amount of additional parking on the grounds of the mansion. It is our understanding that the Forum's staff, which currently numbers about 16, is not expected ever to increase to much more than 20, and that at present only 6 staff members will drive to work. The Cady-Lee's proximity to MetroRail and bus service can be expected to reduce the need for automobile use by either regular staff or visitors. We further understand that meetings in the building will generally be small and will take place during business hours. Most nearby residents will likely be at work at that time and thus would not be incommoded by an occasional car parked on the street. We therefore believe that the 10 proposed parking spaces on the mansion property will be more than adequate to meet the day-to-day parking needs of the Forum, while not overwhelming the limited grounds with pavement. We were pleased that the Forum plans to landscape such parking as it *does* add in a manner that is keeping with the historic setting of the Cady-Lee, and that it intends to employ environmentally friendly, non-blacktop paving materials that will minimize the adverse impact to the health and attractiveness of the grounds. The grounds of the Cady-Lee are quite small for a house of its size and are already bordered by the unfortunately inharmonious Eastmont Co-op building; we would not like to see the beauty and future value of the property further diminished by the incorporation of excess parking space.

Overall, Historic Takoma feels fortunate that the Cady-Lee Mansion has passed to new owners who have genuine concern and respect for both the Takoma community and for our most prominent historical asset. I am therefore pleased to testify on behalf of Historic Takoma, Inc. in support of this application for a zoning exemption.

Issue of the Bike Trail

Not for the first time, Historic Takoma finds itself obliged to address a seemingly unrelated matter, that of the Metropolitan Branch Bike Trail, at a zoning hearing. We have recently learned that objections have been raised to the granting of the requested zoning exception by proponents of the so-called "eastern alignment" of the bike trail, which would take the trail through the grounds of the Cady-Lee Mansion. Historic Takoma is opposed to the inclusion of the bike trail in decisionmaking regarding the zoning of the Cady-Lee Mansion, for the following reasons:

Firstly, no final route has been selected for the bike trail. The "eastern alignment" of the bike trail is only one of four possible routes that have been suggested for the trail; no final route has been selected. And although planning for the trail has yet to reach a stage where the possible routes have been presented to the public for open discussion, many Takoma citizens of both DC and Maryland prefer another route on the west side of the tracks. In fact, the plans for a development (by New Legacy Partners) that is soon to occur on the west side of the tracks specifically sets aside space for a bike trail.

Further, as previously noted, the Cady-Lee Mansion is situated in the Takoma Park Historic District and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Federal as well as local law provides protections for historic properties and historic districts. Since the bike trail will be funded with federal transportation money, Section 4(f) of the Transportation Act applies. That Act says that no transportation funds can be used on a project that would take historic property unless there is "no prudent and feasible alternative." There are in fact three other alternatives that are prudent and feasible. Although all of them would use historic property within the historic district, only one would impact this historic landmark.

The restoration of the Cady-Lee and its purchase by an organization that will not only be an asset to our community but will take respectful, loving care of our most important historic resource are extremely positive events for Takoma. We respectfully ask that the Board of Zoning Adjustments grant the zoning exception that will bring about a happy ending for the mansion and our community.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide comments.