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October 17, 2002

Mr. Geoffrey H. Griffis
Chairperson
Board of Zoning Adjustment
441 4th Street, NW, Suite 210
Washington, DC 20001

Re: Case No. 16930

Dear Mr. Griffis,

I am a long-time resident of Capitol Hill. I am writing to the BZA as an individual who is concerned about the National Association of Realtors (NAR) proposed building at 500 NewJersey Avenue NW. This project was on the agenda at a recent meeting of the Zoning and Licensing (Z&L) Committee of ANC 6A that I attended. This site is just a couple of blocks from the Capitol and is the most important undeveloped site in my neighborhood. I have lived less than a mile away from it for over a quarter century.

NAR's plan stunned me. It had a similar effect on the Z&L committee which rejected 8-0. A neighbor, who has been active in various Capitol Hill land-use issues for many years, commented that she had never seen the committee so unified on an issue in its rejection of the NAR proposal. In my opinion, here are three aspects of NAR's approach that the Z&L committee found particularly egregious:

- First, last year the Z&L committee and the DC Board of Zoning Adjustment reviewed and approved a design for this same site. It was produced by one of the city's most respected architectural firms for developer Jay Hellman and enjoyed overwhelming support from local residents and businesspeople with whom Hellman consulted extensively. NAR replaced this widely-accepted plan with a radically different one into which local residents had no input. Under these circumstances, the committee's rejection of the new plan was hardly surprising.

- Second, The new plan represented less than 60 days' architectural work by a Massachusetts firm. The previously approved design represented some 15 years of research, including in-depth consultations with cultural, historical, architectural and planning authorities. The site's odd footprint discouraged many people from seeing it as a development location. Hellman's plan proved otherwise, evoking a look of one of America's most beloved buildings, New York's Flatiron building at Broadway and 5th Avenue.

- Third, the NAR seeks to replace the dignified style of the Hellman design with a postmodern glass tower. Hellman's design was calculated to complement, reflect and expand the timelessly imposing presence of the Capitol. In a letter to the BZA strongly supporting Hellman's design, Washington Post architectural columnist Roger Lewis called it "iconic". It showed a receptivity to neighborhood character rare among developers. By contrast, NAR's new design is a glass box of the kind seen on K Street, L'Enfant Plaza, Crystal City and Tyson's Corner - not to mention similar monstrosities that line the highways in cities like Dallas and Houston. Its insensitivity to its site reflects a vulgar mentality that is completely inappropriate, especially as the real estate profession's physical presence within the shadow of the U.S. Capitol. ANC Commissioner Daniel Pernell III opened the Z&L discussion by observing that the proposed NAR building "looks like an iceberg". Mr. Pernell may not be an architect. But he has the common sense that seems to have eluded the NAR and its designers and consultants on this project.

BZA
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Exhibit No. 72

Board of Zoning Adjustment
District of Columbia
CASE NO.16930
EXHIBIT NO.72

I am mystified by the NAR's insensitivity to the special character of our Nation's Capitol and the feelings of its residents. It seems to me that NAR is squandering its resources in replacing a successful, community-supported design approved over a year ago.

To produce its plan, NAR held a closed contest, appointing three firms to submit designs. A panel of judges chose one of the three. To gild its action, NAR implied smugly at the Z&L meeting that its judges' credentials support its arbitrary decision to scrap the design that both ANC and BZA approved last year. The truth is that the judges chose from three new plans given them by NAR's head selection committee. It is not clear if the judges were even aware of the Hellman design and last year's approvals.

Why did NAR discard the valuable assets of a successful plan, community support, and an existing BZA approval? I have no idea. But what is clear is that since NAR decided to buy this site earlier this year, it has mismanaged things badly - culturally, architecturally and its relations with the local community. At the Z&L meeting ANC Commissioner Robert L. Hall pointed out the responsibility that the NAR has to the public with respect to this site. He called it "stewardship". I wonder whether NAR's current management understands that concept.

Ironically, NAR touts its plan as environmentally sound because it includes things like solar panels. But if it really cared about the environment of this specific location, which is one of the most culturally, historically and architecturally sensitive in the nation, it would want to integrate its building with it. Genuine environmental concern goes beyond fashionable phrases like "solar panel". Moreover, I suspect that every environmental technology in its plan can fit into the previously approved design, which also takes into account extensive research on how the work habits of the building's occupants will likely respond to new computer and communication technologies. Whatever NAR's plan is about, it's not green values or technology.

Nor is NAR's plan a better investment. If anything, the opposite can be argued because NAR's design disregards the principal value of real estate: location. NAR's proposed building would have permanently shut windows, even though every office will have a street-front window. The NAR plan has scrapped Hellman's provision for balconies that would permit tenants to step out and look right at the U.S. Capitol.

Let's ensure that the huge gain made by our community last year, when BZA wisely approved the Hellman plan, is not forfeited to insensitivity, myopia, big-organization slickness and a sheer lack of community responsibility and common sense.

Very truly yours,



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From: Bill Sisolak

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Comments:

Dear Mr. Griffis,

Please accept this letter for submission to the BZA in its consideration of Case No. 16930 (500 New Jersey Avenue NW) at the October 22, 2002 meeting.

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