APPLICATION OF THE SIDWELL FRIENDS SCHOOL, BZA CASE NO. 17149

HEARING BEFORE THE BOARD OF ZONING ADJUSTMENT
JUNE 29, 2004
TESTIMONY OF CATHY WISS
COMMISSIONER, ANC 3F06

In its resolution, ANC 3F recommended that the following conditions be incorporated into the Board's order:

1. **That the first phase of construction must include the two-level garage with 307 zoning compliant parking spaces. Sidwell will also maintain the 5 spaces behind the Johnson Building for bus parking and the 16 spaces by the Zartman House for visitor/guest parking.**

The parking garage is being built to accommodate *on campus* more of the vehicles being driven to Sidwell than the school's existing parking lot. This is an important first step in complying with Section 206.3, which provides that

> Ample parking space, but not less than that required in chapter 21 of this title, shall be provided to accommodate the students, teachers, and visitors likely to come to the site by automobile.

At the moment, Sidwell *does not allow* its students to park on campus. This has created perennial parking problems in the neighborhood. Not only do Sidwell students park on the street – in both unrestricted and restricted spaces, they have been observed parking on private property.

ANC 3F first learned of this problem two years ago when we were working on The Washington Home parking lot case. Residents told us Sidwell students were parking in The Home's lot, contributing to the overflow situation. In allowing The Home an increase in parking spaces, this Board had to take the unusual step of requiring The Home to gate its parking lot to keep others – like Sidwell students – out. One student apparently parks habitually in the driveway of an unoccupied house on Tilden Street. The Wells traffic study reports that students also park in the private parking lot at McLean Gardens. ANC 3F hopes that once the parking garage is built these students find their way to it.

2. **That all students, faculty, and staff be required to park on campus.**

Unfortunately, Sidwell still asks this Board to give its students the option of parking on neighborhood streets even after the parking garage is built. The basis for this request is that some blocks do not have residential parking restrictions. These 88 unrestricted parking spaces are used by many others coming to the neighborhood: post office customers and personnel, as well as visitors to nearby homes, Fannie Mae,

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the small office building at Wisconsin and Quebec Street, the health club and shops, The Washington Home, Hearst School, and Hearst Playground. Allowing Sidwell students to park on the street would take away parking for these other uses.

Even though Sidwell has asked its students to park in unrestricted spaces only, they often choose to park in restricted spaces anyway. Residents alerted Sidwell to the problem as early as September 2002, when they wrote a letter notifying the school that 8 student cars parked repeatedly in the 3600 block of Tilden Street. Some of these students were still parking there a month later. On May 20, 2004, I observed a student park in a *restricted* space on Tilden Street, even though several unrestricted spaces on 37th and Quebec Streets were available. Why did she do this? Was it because the unrestricted spaces are much farther from the classroom building?

Requiring all students to park on campus seems to be the only way to prevent them from parking in restricted spaces. It is also what the Zoning Regulations require.

3. **That all student, faculty, and staff cars be registered with the school, that Sidwell provide stickers to the driver, and that no students be allowed to park in restricted or unrestricted parking spaces on residential streets.**

4. **That Sidwell develop a traffic management plan which includes monitoring the neighborhood for violators of the requirement for on campus parking and sanctions for such violations.**

Measures to register and identify student cars and to monitor the neighborhood for parking infractions have been used successfully by other schools in our area. ANC 3F also requests that Sidwell institute a system of sanctions, such as fines, to give some teeth to this policy. So far, simply writing letters and perhaps talking to students has not worked.

5. **That Sidwell adopt a transportation management plan, including MetroCheck, carpooling, and shuttle buses from its Bethesda campus and local Metro stops and demonstrate that it can reduce vehicular traffic to the campus by 15 percent.**

A surprisingly large number of students, faculty, and staff drive to Sidwell even though it is on a bus line and not far from two Metro stations. In addition, Sidwell owns at least five buses that could be used to transport groups of students from the suburbs, the Bethesda campus, or a subway station, as other schools do. This Board has required other institutions to take measures to reduce vehicular traffic in order to be granted a special exception. A transportation management plan that reduces traffic congestion and pollution is in keeping with Sidwell's desire to develop a "green" campus.

6. **That enrollment be capped at 800 students (20 students above BZA Order of August 16, 1996, in Case No. 16139) until completion of the**

garage and that there be no enrollment increase until Sidwell has demonstrated that all students, teachers, faculty, visitors are parking on campus for one school year.

The Zoning Regulations do not provide for increases in enrollment to pay for new buildings, like the parking garage. The parking garage is being built to come into compliance with Section 206.3. (A less expensive alternative would be to put in a larger surface parking lot, but that would leave little space for the other buildings Sidwell wishes to build. Thus, Sidwell stands to gain by building this garage, not just the neighborhood or the city.)

Given the past problems with traffic and student parking in the neighborhood at current enrollment of 800, ANC 3F cannot be certain that Sidwell will be able to control traffic and parking well enough even with the garage to receive an immediate nod for an enrollment increase to 850 students. More students mean that more traffic will be generated and more parking needed. A one-year test of the school's ability to park all vehicles on site and to manage traffic would give this Board a means of knowing whether an increase of enrollment to 850 would, as Section 206.2 requires, "not likely . . . become objectionable to adjoining and nearby property".

Furthermore, Sidwell has a long history of noncompliance with its enrollment caps, something that troubles ANC 3F. For the past 5 school years, Sidwell has exceeded its cap of 780 students and is planning to do so again next year. These students represent a substantial amount of tuition that the school would not have realized if it had followed this Board's order, money that could be seen as offsetting the cost of the parking garage. Because students have already been accepted for next fall and cannot now be refused admission, ANC 3F recommends that this Board increase the enrollment cap to 800, the number of students admitted for Fall 2004.

7. **That all student drop-off and pickup, including 5th and 6th grade students, be on the grounds of Sidwell and not on 37th Street or any neighborhood residential street.**

At a meeting on February 2, 2004, I first asked Sidwell to discontinue drop off and pick up for middle school students on 37th Street. Other ANC 3F commissioners have also repeatedly asked that *all* drop off and pick up be accommodated through the Wisconsin Avenue entrance to reduce congestion on 37th Street, promote safety of students and other traveling through the area, eliminate satellite drop off and pick up sites on surrounding streets, and reduce speeding through the neighborhood.

Drop off and pick up for the Sidwell middle school creates congestion even when Hearst Elementary School across the street is not generating traffic simultaneously. I first encountered complete gridlock from the middle school pick up in early January when driving home from a meeting. It apparently was a day for early dismissal at Sidwell. There were no other cars on the road except those picking up middle school

students, but these were parked on both sides of the street and in the middle of the street as well. It took several minutes before I could drive through and continue home.

Congestion occurs in the morning, as well. Cars weave in and around each other as some drop off students more quickly than others, thus using both the parking and travel lanes. Some simply do not bother to pull over to the curb to drop off students.

Because 37th Street, like all nearby streets, is narrow – only 30 feet wide, an interesting conflict occurs when northbound garbage trucks and trucks servicing The Washington Home must travel through the area at the same time as Sidwell drop off. Because these large trucks cannot pass another vehicle on 37th Street while cars are parked on both sides of the street, they can be stopped for several minutes by the steady stream of Sidwell cars traveling south. Long lines of cars build up behind these trucks on 37th Street and can block cars attempting to exit Tilden Street.

Using public streets for student drop off and pick up can be unsafe. In October 2003, while driving through the neighborhood, I almost hit a young student who darted out into Upton Street to meet his mother, who was parked on the north side of Upton Street. This could easily have been a horrible situation for both of us. Sidwell has said it wants to keep 5th and 6th grade drop off and pick up on 37th Street so as to protect the younger students from the older students. What could be more dangerous about the older students than the possibility of being hit by an automobile on city streets?

That same afternoon, as I continued to the corner, my path was impeded by several other cars picking up Sidwell students. They were parked illegally in the crosswalks, blocking the way and visibility of oncoming cars. (This situation is illustrated on page 14 of Tab D of Sidwell's February 13, 2004, application.) It turns out that many families use the 3600 and 3700 blocks of Upton Street, the 4000 and 4100 blocks of 37th Street, and the 3600 block of Tilden Street as satellite pick up points for middle school students. This disrupts traffic and creates hazards for students and drivers. It annoys residents, who complain that their privacy is invaded when the streets facing their houses become temporary parking lots for Sidwell. This problem has only intensified since Sidwell instituted a policy to prevent congestion that parents refrain from lining up by the middle school before school lets out. Parents who arrive early simply park elsewhere in the neighborhood. On May 26, about 30 students were using the satellite pick up point at Upton and 37th Street.

Over the past year, ANC 3F has been working with residents of streets to the north of Sidwell on traffic calming. After DDOT approved traffic calming devices for Upton Street, residents of other streets asked for traffic calming measures, as well. One reason is that Sidwell parents driving to the middle school are perceived as speeding on neighborhood streets. One resident e-mailed ANC 3F in December 2003, "I live on 37th between warren and veazey [sic] and all of the Sidwell traffic spills off southbound Reno at Windom or Yuma to skip the light and comes blasting up 37th st. [sic]."

Limiting drop off and pick up to only students of 5th and 6th graders and their siblings will not cure these problems. ANC 3F has suggested measures Sidwell could take to accommodate all drop off and pick up from the Wisconsin Avenue exit, including widening the entrance driveway and creating a special "middle school path" to separate younger and older students.

8. **That Sidwell change the main entrance to the expanded middle school from 37th Street to the courtyard on the Wisconsin Avenue side of the building so that it faces the center of campus in order to discourage parent pickup and drop-off from 37th Street and surrounding streets.**

Sidwell's design for the middle school addition shows a large entrance on 37th Street closer to Tilden Street than the current entrance. Because this entrance would be directly opposite the entrance to Hearst School, it could cause traffic conflicts if used for more than a fire door. Also, it is fairly close to Tilden Street and the driveway to The Washington Home's parking lot. Any queue could easily block access to the lot or the intersection of 37th and Tilden Street.

Interestingly, Sidwell now claims the "front" of the school is on the courtyard, not 37th Street. It should not be so difficult, then, to redesign the courtyard entrance as the main entrance to the middle school and eliminate this overdesigned entrance.

9. **That the lighted tennis courts to be used in the evenings be located away from the Washington Home and placed on the Wisconsin Avenue side of the campus.**

The proposed new tennis courts near the upper school are very close to the property line with The Washington Home and would overlook resident rooms and terraces. Lighting for night games would be highly objectionable. Sidwell and The Washington Home signed an agreement on June 14, 2004, that

> Sidwell Friends will not light the two tennis courts at the north edge of the campus, nor use them after 9 p.m. without TWH consent. The Washington Home notes that it would be difficult to play tennis after 9 p.m. without lighting

10. **That Sidwell adopt a construction management plan in consultation with impacted institutions, residential neighbors, and ANC 3C and ANC 3F.**

Commissioners from ANC 3F did meet with Sidwell and others to work on a construction management plan, but consider the plan Sidwell submitted with the prehearing statement only a draft and not final. As of our ANC meeting on June 2, ANC 3F had not agreed to any construction management plan.

11. **That Sidwell adopt a detailed landscaping plan showing type, size, and location of trees to be planted in order to screen the middle school, new**

gym, and new tennis courts from homes on Tilden, 37th, and Upton Streets and from residents of The Washington Home and that this plan be accepted in writing by ANC 3C, ANC 3F, and The Washington Home.

The plan Sidwell submitted to ANC 3F appears to be an initial sketch. It shows an intent to plant "canopy trees, flowering trees, and broadleaf evergreen shrubs" to screen the middle school addition. These would be partially on its own property and partially on the property of The Washington Home. No indication of exact location, size, or type of tree is given, making evaluation of the plan impossible. Furthermore, the plan seems to ignore that several trees already exist on The Washington Home's property in this area. Will Sidwell be planting on top of them? Digging in their critical root zones? ANC 3F questions why Sidwell should not be required to plant trees on its own property.

As for screening the gym from The Washington Home and residences on Upton Street, the landscaping plan proposes "vines and perennials planted on metal fence". If the existing metal fence in this area is any indication, the new fence will be covered with poison ivy, Virginia creeper, and other assorted vines. Even if well-maintained, such a fence could never "screen" the gym because the gym will tower over The Home.

On June 14, Sidwell and The Washington Home entered into an agreement that

> Sidwell Friends will install and maintain landscaping that is generally consistent in nature with the plan already submitted to TWH for the area between the property line adjacent to the Middle School addition and TWH parking lot. The final composition of this area will also be subject to input from residential neighbors. . . .
>
> In addition to the landscaping described in number 1 above, Sidwell Friends will design and install mutually agreed upon landscaping along the south edge of TWH property. Maintenance of that landscaping will be the responsibility of TWH.

ANC 3F has not agreed to any landscaping plan but requests that a more detailed plan be presented that can be incorporated into the Board's order.

12. **That Sidwell adopt a strong tree protection plan for existing trees on The Washington Home's property, including the tall hedge by the proposed tennis courts, with a commitment to replace in kind any of these trees damaged in construction.**

Many trees on The Washington Home's property are very close to the property line, including a dense evergreen hedge near resident rooms and terraces of The Washington Home. Because construction activities like digging, driving heavy equipment, and blasting can damage the roots of trees and kill them, ANC 3F asks that

Sidwell work with The Home to protect trees and replace them if construction activities cause them to die. This is especially important because these trees screen Sidwell's buildings from The Washington Home and residences on surrounding streets.

13. **That Sidwell hold quarterly meetings open to all residents of the community, that it provide written notice of these meetings to residents within 400 feet of the school, that these meetings include a high-ranking Sidwell representative, that Sidwell take minutes, and that these minutes be posted on the Sidwell web site and forwarded to ANC 3C and ANC 3F.**

Such meetings have been effective in airing and resolving issues at other schools.

14. **That Sidwell provide, on a monthly basis, a calendar of school events with the anticipated number of attendees in writing to residents within a 400-foot radius of the campus and on its web site and to ANC 3F by e-mail.**

This will ensure that residents will know when to expect a greater number of people and cars coming to campus. It should also help Sidwell plan for events. In the past, events have spilled out into the neighborhood and also onto the grounds of Hearst School and Recreation Center.

15. **That Sidwell provide to ANC 3F on a yearly basis a report certifying that it is in compliance with its BZA order.**

This provision will help ANC 3F determine whether Sidwell remains in compliance with its BZA order, particularly on the enrollment cap, traffic management and enforcement, on campus parking, landscape plan, and construction management plan.