

ANC 3E Oral Testimony – River School BZA Application

Preamble

Thank you Commissioners for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Jonathan McHugh and I am ANC Commissioner for ANC 3E05, the SMD that the proposed development is located in. My remarks will focus on the main issue with River School's application that concerned ANC 3E, mainly its traffic impacts and whether they constitute an adverse impact on the surrounding community.

Overview

ANC3E has spent a significant amount of time analyzing the River School's application, working with neighbors, working with the Applicant, working with city agencies, and discussing it among ourselves in addition to public and community meetings. We recognize the unique nature of River School's mission and appreciate its contribution to both the community and the city. The actual design of the school and the capacities proposed are issues we are comfortable with. The primary issue we have is the impacts on traffic the proposed development would impose on the surrounding community.

Traffic issues within the area surrounding the proposed River School development are akin to a frog boiling in water. Each nearby development project has brought more and more traffic impacts to the surrounding transportation infrastructure but are evaluated only in their own narrow context and not on holistic impacts over time. But those impacts accrue substantially over time and manifest themselves as they come online, the effects evaluated only by looking back with each successive project versus discerning them holistically on the entire transportation infrastructure going forward.

Siloed approach to evaluating development projects

The nature of DDOT traffic engineering in the context of evaluating development projects is in general a siloed approach that doesn't take a holistic view over time of the impacts of projects on the surrounding transportation infrastructure. As a result, the community has one opportunity to effectively manage the impacts of previous, current and future development projects and, like in the musical Hamilton, in order to "not throw' away my shot", must use that opportunity to remedy existing and future impacts on not just the present application but any other existing development transportation impacts. This must also include not making a bad situation worse if the present application is developed.

When ANC 3E first started evaluating this project, it used the data from a number of previous transportation studies completed in support of other development projects and campus plans. These indicated a fairly stable traffic state, with some exceptions, and were not flagged as a cause for concern. Once the Applicant's Comprehensive Transportation Review was complete though, it was immediately obvious that the surrounding development projects were having, and were going to have, a dramatically worse impact on the traffic infrastructure. The holistic effects had clearly not been foreseen by the previous studies. This caused us to reevaluate what

we thought would constitute an adverse impact on the surrounding community and how that might be mitigated in order to gain our support. To wit, find a way to achieve a reduction on the order of 70 – 80 percent reduction in traffic arriving onsite versus the 45 percent proposed. As our resolution states, we attempted to work with the Applicant to arrive at a mutually acceptable solution with this as a starting point for that solution. We ultimately could not come to terms.

We still believe, given the available data, and the fact that any other use proposed for the site, even if upzoned for more residential density, would create significantly less impact than what is proposed and thus requires a significant amount of mitigation in order to not constitute an adverse impact.

Community opportunity for managing impacts of projects is limited to times when applicants embark on development projects except for large institutions like universities and colleges.

This project in particular, where a number of the mitigations proposed are actually remedies for the effects of a nearby institution, National Presbyterian School, who lacks a robust Transportation Management Plan itself since it hasn't recently proposed a significant development project, bear this out.

Even if mitigations are proposed, and a project gains approval, those mitigations may take years to be implemented even if the changes are a substantial improvement on existing conditions regardless of whether the proposed development takes place. The proposed development being considered today is an example of this phenomenon where the proposed light re-timing and addition of a left-turn signal would dramatically improve the intersection of Nebraska Avenue and Van Ness St immediately but the community may have to wait years for these improvements, and the approval of a relatively unrelated development project in order to realize them. ANC 3E believes this a flawed public policy approach that penalizes the community and forces it to negotiate for actions that should be implemented regardless of whether development projects are proposed and approved or not approved.

Private schools and traffic impacts

Schools, particularly private institutions with a large number of non-local families, impose a disparate traffic burden on the communities they are located in, not unlike universities except on a smaller scale. This is particularly evident in the AM Peak Hour and the PM School Hours with Drop-offs and Pick-ups, the majority of traffic congestion in the PM School Hours being private school traffic. To illustrate, during the course of this process a private school parent lamented their odyssey of navigating the traffic caused by private schools in order to drop-off and pick-up their children off at private schools, as one person put it "They aren't IN traffic, they ARE traffic." The effects of this traffic impact can be readily seen with the queues that develop at St Albans, National Presbyterian School (NPS) across the street, and The River School's current location on Macarthur Boulevard. The vast majority of families use cars to transport children to and from these schools, making little use of the alternative transportation modes that abound around them. The data submitted by the Applicant for its existing site

confirms this. It is emblematic of most of the private schools in the area and it's a immediate cause of the traffic impacts at Nebraska and Van Ness St that are unduly caused by the National Presbyterian School and future impacts from Sidwell Friend's expansion. ANC 3E is therefore wary of supporting another institution of similar size and possibly more of an impact without significant traffic mitigations.

The Promise of Vision Zero and the effects of development projects

The premise of Vision Zero, to dramatically reduce the number of traveler accidents and deaths, is part and parcel to how ANC 3E evaluates development proposals and their impact on the surrounding community. To date, ANC 3E believes the City's approach to achieving the goals of Vision Zero is one of incrementalism, of imposing a low bar on applicants in terms of transformative actions that would cause transit users to choose any other mode of transit besides cars, be that Metro, buses, car-pooling, cycling, walking, etc. The City has a diverse and robust transportation infrastructure but a decidedly passive approach to encouraging persons and institutions to use it. ANC 3E believes that the City should use its regulatory powers to be much more assertive in that encouragement, the development process being a prominent opportunity to do so. ANC 3E believes this is one of those opportunities.

In what we asked of the applicant, we took the approach that, given the dramatically degraded Loss of Service in existing and future conditions at a number of the surrounding intersections, the Applicant should endeavor to impose as little vehicular traffic as possible in order to not make a bad situation worse. What we asked is in line with the location proposed and the Applicant's statement that one of the advantages of the location is its proximity to a number of transit options besides cars. Several Commissioners on ANC3E, this one included, related their experience doing just that, finding any other transit mode. We don't believe, given an urban environment and the multiplicity of transit options, this is an unreasonable expectation.

In particular, the intersection of Nebraska, Van Ness St, and 42nd Street, which ANC 3E has asked to be remedied in previous resolutions, is still not remedied by the proposed development and in fact, given the increased turning movements, will more than likely become worse despite the Applicant's assertion that it will become somewhat better, primarily for the traffic exiting NPS.

In Summary

The City has made a stated commitment to a safer transportation network, one of the most effective ways of achieving that goal is to reduce the number of cars on the road, to strongly encourage persons and families to use any other form of transportation in order to accomplish this. ANC 3E believes the City, through DDOT and the Office of Planning, is not being aggressive enough in encouraging development projects to construct proposals that incorporate these expectations into practical application. This is an opportunity for the City to do so. We might also note the lack of regulatory power in requiring private educational institutions to submit plans detailing how they manage their community impacts on a regular basis, in line with the special exceptions they receive in order build and operate their institutions, that would allow the City and the community to properly evaluate and mitigate those impacts.

Thank you for your time and I welcome any questions.