

February 27, 2022

Subject: Board of Zoning Adjustment Case #20643: Maret School Sports Complex Development Project

Dear Chairman Hill:

I am writing to you with a request to deny or postpone the vote regarding a special zoning exception in Case #20643: Maret School Sports Complex Development for the reasons described below.

I reside on the corner of Utah Ave NW and Nebraska Ave NW - across the street from the Episcopal Center for Children (ECC). I have lived here for 22 years and got to know the Former ECC Director Alan Korz, some of the other staff members, and many of the former students. I got to meet many of the students during my year-long absence from work due to an injury. During nice weather a staff member would take a group of students for a walk in the neighborhood. Due to the weather and having several dogs, the students and staff member would engage me in conversations about my dogs and other things going on. I enjoyed these interactions immensely. I have always strongly supported the mission of the ECC, especially since I had first-hand experience as to the important work they have done in the past. In fact, one of my first full-time employment opportunities after college was as a houseparent for emotionally challenged children at a 24-hour residential treatment center and school. It was an experience I treasure and it made me a better person. Kids have a way of doing that to a person.

Reinvention and Red Herrings

Now, the ECC is in a pickle. ECC stated they closed because the local DMV governments no longer provided funding for special challenged students to attend specialized schools. In DC and it seems in other DMV jurisdictions too, the special challenged students are being integrated into the neighborhood DCPS and other public school systems, with funding for challenged children being absorbed into local school budgets. How did the ECC not see their program was in jeopardy when budgets were being cut and/or re-directed?

Since the ECC ceased operations in June 2019, the ECC stated it needed to "reinvent" itself as they have done several times before. Their wish is to keep in alignment with a mission to help children, which I applaud. However, I am a bit confused and I feel I am being misled too. The ECC on many occasions spoke about beginning an after-school care program for children. During a recent meeting an ANC Commissioner implied that if Maret's proposed plan is not approved, it will hurt challenged children. With the above

Board of Zoning Adjustment
District of Columbia
CASE NO.20643
EXHIBIT NO.250

information concerning the lack of funding for special schools for challenged children, I have to question if the ECC goal to work with challenged children is realistic or even possible.

Further, my understanding is that is not what the ECC is planning with the after-school program. Changing the language from after-school care for children to programs for “challenged” children is a “red herring” from both the ECC and the ANC. It makes the discussion more emotionally charged, is misleading, and sends a mixed message that does not lend itself to transparency and in turn raises distrust in the community. All of the above inhibits working together for a cooperative solution that avoids negatively impacting the immediate community and disrupting the quality of life.

It is also disingenuous for the ECC and Maret to paint all individuals who oppose the current plan as being against specially challenged children or any children; this is a Trojan Horse and could not be further from the truth. I am not opposed to helping any children, special or otherwise.

While I do not oppose Maret in their quest to rent the ECC fields and utilize them for their upper school sports programs, I am opposed to Maret subleasing the fields to all large, organized sports club/groups located anywhere in the DMV. (i.e., DC soccer, National Soccer League Clubs, DC Dynasty, etc.)

For example, Blessed Sacrament School, which is also in our neighborhood, has and strictly adheres to a 6 pm cut-off time for the use of their fields during the week (with no use on weekends) as part of being a “good steward” to the surrounding neighbors. Blessed Sacrament does not have any private residences sharing a property line with their fields.

An Unreasonable Neighborhood Burden

Within a half-mile of the ECC, we have: Lafayette-Pointer Park / Lafayette Elementary School, which has a multi-use field for baseball and other sports, as well as natural open areas in the park; and St. Johns College High School and their multi-sports complex. St. Johns games attract many hundreds of spectators per game. Neither Lafayette-Pointer Park /Lafayette Elementary School nor St. Johns College High School have private residences sharing a property line with their fields and/or multi-sports complex.

Now Maret wants to add a third multi-sports complex in a residential neighborhood and their project will be the only multi-sports field sharing a property line with private residences. It is an unreasonable expectation that the neighborhood should be forced to absorb another location for organized sporting events attracting crowds of spectators at some of its events.

Call It What It Is

This is the Maret Sports Complex Development Project, and it is not appropriate to build it, as currently proposed, on the ECC field.

It is easy to obtain many letters of support from individuals who do not live in the immediate area, because they and their homes will not be impacted when the sub-leasing of the fields draws large crowds.

I was an ANC Commissioner for seven years, until the most recent election, when I chose not to run for another term. I always attempted to be a fair and equitable evaluator of the facts and to weigh the effect a project would have on the neighbors that would be impacted the most. I had to forget my own opinions/biases and see the issue from their perspective.

I was obligated as their representative to support their point of view, because it was what I promised to do as a Commissioner. I do not feel the current ANC is representing the point of view of their constituents who will be the most adversely impacted by this project.

Quality Of Life

When I was purchasing my home, I specifically chose not to be near a commercial corridor or across the street from a park. I spent time parked in my car in front of my future home to observe the traffic, pedestrians, and activities that would impact my property. I spoke with the neighbors, inquiring about the ECC and the traffic to and from the ECC property.

The neighbors who purchased homes sharing the property line with the ECC might have done the same, as well as other neighbors living near the ECC field. They did not purchase next to a park where it is expected to hear children shouting and noise from traffic traveling to the destination outside school hours and on the weekends. They purchased a home where they might only hear children shouting and playing during normal school hours.

Now these homeowners who share the ECC property line are expected to sit and “enjoy” their backyards with what could be seven days a week, non-school hours organized sports activities to include a scoreboard, coaches, referees, umpires shouting out calls and blowing whistles. In addition, how about the spectators and teammates shouting out encouragement from the sidelines. That is not “enjoyment.” In addition, the increased traffic volumes will be anything from nominal to horrific.

As you are aware, the community around the ECC is a low density, residential area of the city. I am not naïve and appreciate how special it is to live in this area, but if you allow this project to go forward it will not only affect the infrastructure of the area but

change the intensity and tenor of the neighborhood, not with the addition of single family residences, but with crowds, converging on a regular basis who do not care about the impact their sporting event is having on a residential neighborhood that wasn't built to accommodate crowds of individuals attending large organized sporting events for organizations like DC Soccer. (i.e., DC Soccer's website boasts 10,000 participants). This does not include the parents and visiting teams/spectators attending championship, tournament, or rivalry games. If you have ever attended a DC Soccer regulation game you can imagine the extra burden it will place on residential "collector" streets. There are good reasons most sports complexes utilized by large sports organizations are built off major roadways with large buffer areas and not in the middle of a residential area sharing property lines with private homes.

I feel Maret and the ECC have not been transparent or realistic about the impact the proposed plan to build the multi-use sports fields and the sub-leasing of the sports fields would have on the neighborhood.

Maret and DDOT have indicated they are proposing modifications to slow down traffic in the immediate neighborhood (i.e., curb extensions to narrow the intersections, etc.), which will further add to traffic backups and congestion on neighborhood streets.

Toxic Turf

Two non-profits, the Science Policy office at Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) and Safe, Healthy, Playing Fields (SHPF) have been studying the effects of artificial turf, and have serious objections to the use of artificial turf and the carcinogens in substances utilized to manufacture artificial turf. Their research shows that these carcinogens are in each blade of artificial turf, and it doesn't matter what infill material is used. The turf impacts the adjacent soil, vegetation, and ground water, all of great concern to the properties adjacent to the ECC fields and downhill towards Rock Creek Park. Also, when the runoff reaches Rock Creek, it would be toxic to aquatic life. I do not know what the impact this runoff will have on our city's wildlife population; however, since the toxins are absorbed through the skin as well as by inhalation and ingestion, I am sure it will adversely impact wildlife. As we know, this is cumulative impact: a fox dies from the toxins, a bird eats part of the fox, the bird dies, etc., etc. Not to mention a family pet could eat the bird, or absorb toxins directly from the artificial turf, or the soil surrounding it, or even drink tainted water from Rock Creek. Remember these toxins will eventually flow into the Chesapeake Bay. In the past, artificial turf toxicity was not something I believed in, but research is proving it is real. Artificial turf that has been removed is not biodegradable, is toxic, leaches carcinogens, and is piling up throughout the United State because there is not yet a way to safe way to dispose of it. If we as citizens are not good stewards for the environment there is no hope for the future.

Summary

To summarize, I do not oppose Maret's plans to utilize the ECC fields for their own students, or local area community/neighborhood and small sports clubs. I do oppose DC Soccer and any large organization utilizing the "Maret Sports Complex". Maret intends to build this complex and then turn it into a profit-making investment at the expense of the local tax-paying community, the community's health and enjoyment of their homes and neighborhood. A 50-year lease is a very long time to live with a "mistake" made at community expense, and ample time to be able to turn the subleasing of the sports complex into a profit-making venture.

I urge the BZA to not grant the special zoning exception for Maret or to postpone the vote for the special zoning exception for Maret, until Maret and the ECC work out, with the community, transparently and in good faith, a compromise regarding the long-term environmental and health hazards. There should be strict restrictions for the sub-leasing of the fields to large sports organizations to include field use hours that will not negatively impact the immediate neighborhood. The community should not have to bear the burden of the cost of building the sports complex, which is exactly what Maret is doing by sub-leasing the fields at the expense of the quality of life in the neighborhood.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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cc: ANC 3/4G