

March 7, 2022

Board of Zoning Adjustment  
Application No. 20643 of the Maret School  
Public Hearing March 9, 2022 @9:30am  
Opposition Testimony

I am writing in opposition to the private Maret School's special exceptions from zoning in the R-1-B Zone to permit it to redevelop the Episcopal Center for Children's (ECC) five-acre field into an athletic complex. For over six months, our ANC commissioners ignored Chevy Chase residents' concerns like me, whose homes not only border the ECC field but will be greatly negatively impacted by the project. The top-selling agent with Long & Foster estimates that Maret's proposed redevelopment of the ECC field will cause property values of homes in the area to decline by 10%.

As a single, tax-paying black woman, who has resided in DC since 1995, I have worked hard to buy two homes in the District of Columbia. By no means am I rich. Moreover, because I live in a certain neighborhood, I shouldn't be defined or labeled by my zip code. My first home was located at 1355 Jefferson Street, NW in 16th Street Heights. In 2007, after selling the first home, I purchased my second home at 5853 Nebraska Avenue, NW, directly across the street from the ECC field.

Over time, I have enjoyed living in the Chevy Chase neighborhood. Founded over 125 years ago with a mission to serve children and families, the Center transitioned from an orphanage to a residential treatment and education program in the 1950s. In the fall of 2019, the ECC closed due to a decline in enrollment.

Neighbors have always been supportive of the school's mission to educate students with special needs. What many of us do not support is the ECC leasing its 5-acre field to the elite private Maret School. The development of a multi-million-dollar sporting complex that would include a baseball field, football/lacrosse field, scoreboards, 25 ft. netting, removal of healthy heritage trees, and a 50-space parking lot will turn a residential neighborhood upside down.

Located in Woodley Park, Maret School has a \$35 million endowment and a principal whose compensation was \$553,000 in 2020. Private school Maret likes to boast about the minority student population it serves. While I am happy that Maret educates students of color, as it should in a post-Civil Rights era, this fact has nothing to do with its ECC field project. 75% of students attending Maret pay full tuition.

Why can't Maret find appropriate land to buy to accommodate their growing school needs – or at least be more respectful of the needs and desires of tax-paying property owners living in the neighborhoods in which the non-DC property tax paying Maret school wants to develop into sporting stadiums? Instead, the elite, private Maret school seems to have gone in search of disrupting DC neighborhoods, to cater to tuition payers -- as the school did with the development of Jelleff Recreation Center in Georgetown. That deal blocked the DC public Hardy Middle School, located across the street, from using it during peak hours.

## **Maret School/ECC Deal**

In February of 2021, the ECC signed a 10-year lease with Maret School to redevelop the field, with an option to renew the lease up to 50 years. Curiously, the property that will include the athletic complex is not subject to the recent DC historic designation that applies to other ECC buildings and a portion of the ECC property. To develop this sporting complex on the ECC field, Maret is seeking numerous zoning exceptions with the BZA because the neighborhood is zoned R-1-B-Zone for residential development – not a massive commercial, regulation-size sports complex.

The money that the ECC receives from Maret will allow the Center to open its doors to students in the fall of 2022. The ECC informed neighbors about this disruptive deal in September 2021. From November 1-4, Maret held four outdoor meetings at homes of neighbors that the school selected, without informing many residents of the meetings. Maret haphazardly distributed flyers on doorsteps to a few homes on streets bordering the school: Utah Avenue, Nebraska Avenue, Rittenhouse, and 28th Streets. Needless to say, many neighbors were unaware of the project and surprised by the news and lack of earlier engagement from the ECC or Maret with the community.

While Maret listened to neighbors, they have NOT shown a willingness to address our concerns about the highly disruptive nature of constructing its sporting complex to the environment, traffic, safety, and tranquility of our neighborhood.

## **Sporting Complex Neighborhood Impact**

**Traffic/Safety:** Maret proposes a curb cut into a 50-car (or more) parking lot on already heavily trafficked Nebraska Avenue. The section of Nebraska Avenue in front of the field that runs from Utah to Oregon Avenues already experiences high commuter traffic from Maryland, in the morning and evening. This will only be exacerbated when redevelopment of Oregon Avenue, NW is completed in 2022 (not to mention during phases of construction).

Maret informed neighbors that weekday games are expected to attract 50 to 60 spectators. Games on Friday afternoons and early evening games, as well as Saturday games (which would occur between 1:00 pm and 6:00 pm) are expected to draw approximately 100 spectators. Five times a year, rivalry games will be held that could be attended by as many as 300 or more spectators.

Many neighborhood children and parents walk to and from DC public school Lafayette. How will their safety be impacted by this significantly increased vehicular traffic on Nebraska Avenue?

**Noise:** Maret plans to sublease the field on days that the school doesn't use it. Games are planned for seven days a week, and the maximum allowable sound level in this zoning district is 60 dB. Sports activities regularly exceed this limit. When would neighbors get a reprieve from the noise?

**Trees/Environmental Impact:** In 2017, DC enacted its heritage tree law, prohibiting the removal of older healthy trees. Maret proposes relocating four healthy heritage trees on the site. Arborists have said that it is nearly impossible to replant 100-year-old-plus trees because the root systems will likely die. In place of natural grass and soil, Maret proposes to turn nearly 3.7 acres of grass into artificial turf. ***Trees and the shade canopies they provide are an urban equity issue that is being addressed across the nation, as they relate to social justice and climate change. Decreasing the tree canopy threatens this effort.***

Maret and its students will gain many benefits from redeveloping the ECC field; students and parents (arguably ‘clients,’ in this case) can enjoy the field and return to their homes. Maret will use the new sporting complex as a marketing tool to attract more students and likely increase its \$42,000 a year tuition, because of the new sporting amenity.

What are the benefits of the project to the community? Maret, a non-profit, private school that pays zero DC property tax, is calling all the shots in our neighborhood. Owner occupants living in the Chevy Chase neighborhood, who pay high DC property taxes, should have their concerns taken seriously.

I very much appreciate the Board of Zoning Adjustment’s attention to this matter.

Kind regards,

Crystal Wright  
5853 Nebraska Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20015