

Cochran, Patricia (DCOZ)

From: John Taylor <johntaylorpr@gmail.com>
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To: DCOZ - BZA Submissions (DCOZ)
Subject: Case 21177 District of Columbia Department of General Services

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Dear Chairman Hill and Board Members:

My name is John Taylor and I live at 437 New York Avenue NW. I am writing to you to offer this written testimony in opposition for Case 21177 involving the City's proposal to establish a temporary Central Cell Block at 501 New York Avenue NW.

I first want to thank you for calling this upcoming hearing for October 9. I'm grateful that you are willing to listen to the concerns of our neighborhood over the City's proposal. (To date, you're the only city officials who have respected our neighborhood enough to listen to us and actually hear our concerns.)

I watched your last hearing on this matter, and I very much appreciate your recognition that the City's representatives didn't follow the proper process when they immediately moved to file a building permit to begin construction at 501 New York without any input from our neighborhood. Had the City's representatives had their way, the community never would have been consulted over their plans which impact everyone living in our neighborhood.

I share your concerns expressed then, not only about the City's representatives disregarding the important step of community input through the ANCs, but their unwillingness to be transparent with the community.

I was hopeful that after the Board expressed concerns about how city officials had conducted themselves that we would see greater transparency when officials met with neighbors at meetings convened by ANC2G and ANC6E following your most recent decision on this matter. Along with many neighbors, I attended both meetings and unfortunately, left both with several unanswered questions.

- No one from the City would explain if the Department of General Services conducted a cost benefit analysis that led to the selection of 501 New York, NW.
- No one would disclose if the Department considered other locations, including those closer to the DC Superior Courts in Judiciary Square.
- No one would disclose if the Department contacted the Federal Government to determine if the federal General Services Administration had suitable property for lease that could serve as an alternative.
- And worst of all, no one from the City was willing to even acknowledge the community's frustration, indeed anger, over how the City has handled this entire matter.

Sadly, the city's representatives left us with the impression that the community should not be questioning their decision and that our questions were not germane or worthy of a response. I've lived in Washington for over 30 years and I've never encountered this level of contempt from DC government employees.

But as the city's attorney insisted in both meetings, the only thing that matters under DC Zoning Regulations is whether or not this Board should grant the City an exception to those regulations.

So here we are.

So, I am writing to strongly urge you as members of the Board of Zoning Adjustment to deny the special exception relief sought by the District of Columbia Department of General Services for the proposed temporary relocation of the Central Cell Block to 501 New York Ave, NW.

If you allow this construction to move forward, our neighborhood will be detrimentally, adversely, and significantly impacted. This would directly violate the intention of the Zoning Regulations and Maps which have governed countless decisions about other surrounding properties in our neighborhood since the passage of the Zoning Act of March 1, 1920, which established the Zoning Commission in the District.

Let's acknowledge what the city's representatives have promised us will happen if you grant the city's request:

We will have six different police forces bringing detainees to this facility 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

We will have over 80 detainees in the facility, along with their arresting officers, and other DC government employees. This far exceeds the number Metropolitan Police Department who previously worked at this location in a normal 8-hour work day.

This means more street parking will be used by these employees and the officers transporting detainees. And this means our already traffic-clogged neighborhood will have more traffic. I can see this stretch of New York Avenue from my home -- each morning and evening during rush hours, first responders have a very difficult time transporting patients to neighboring hospitals. This added traffic will make this problem worse.

I am also concerned about noise related to this facility. Even though Councilmember Brooke Pinto extracted a promise from the city that noise insulation will be added to the building, this does nothing to address the noise that will come from the increased number of vehicles and people that will be drawn to the building 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. We didn't face anything close to this with the prior use of 501 New York Ave, NW.

We are also concerned about the safety of our neighborhood. The notion that no one from the City is concerned that there is a daycare center and apartments directly across the street from 501 New York Ave, NW is frankly shocking to me. Would any of you want to live across the street from this sort of facility? Would you be comfortable leaving your child at a daycare center across the street from a building holding people accused of violent crimes?

I've lived in Washington for over 30 years and I can tell you that our neighborhood has improved over that time period. Vacant buildings and homes have been renovated, new construction has come to previously vacant lots. Our neighborhood has evolved into a vibrant one with numerous mixed-use residential developments. A good part of that success is that the city's Zoning Regulations have been consistently enforced over many years. Developers have consulted with the neighborhood through our ANCs.

Now the City is coming to you and asking for you to make an exception to the Zoning Regulations which have contributed to these improvements. They are asking you to look past the near unanimous neighborhood opposition to their decision. And they are firmly unwilling to entertain any alternative locations for this facility.

We think that the City can do better.

If you move to deny their request for an exception to the City's Zoning rules, they will be forced to do so.

It's not like there aren't other existing properties in the city which could be configured to serve as a temporary Central Cell Block. With commercial vacancy rates Downtown and in the East End at record high rates, I find it hard to believe that the City can't find a more suitable location. These neighborhoods are almost entirely commercial or governmental in nature and if they chose a property there for this Cell Block, no one from the City would need to come before this Board asking for you to make any exception to the city's Zoning rules. After all, the existing Central Cell Block is near the DC Superior Courts for very good reasons. Why can't a temporary Central Cell Block be constructed nearby?

Thank you for your consideration.

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