

8 September 2002

Carol Mitten, Chair
Zoning Commission
District of Columbia Office of Zoning
441 4th Street, NW, Suite 210-S
Washington, DC 20001

~~Zoning Commission~~
District of Columbia
Case 02-17
Exhibit 45

I'm writing to urge the Commission to reject Stonebridge Associates' application for a zoning upgrade for the Washington Clinic/Lisner Home site (case #ZC 02-17).

I've lived on 42nd Street, just north of Military Road, for 6 years now and because I work at home and walk most everywhere, often with a small child (now almost 5) in tow, I experience our neighborhood both day and night, and on weekdays as well as weekends. And, as a result, I'm certain that building a 200+ unit apartment building where the Washington Clinic now stands will have a disastrous effect on the immediate neighborhood.

Military Road is a two lane road (at least around here) that, nevertheless, functions as a major east-west route for commuters. As early as 2:45pm on weekdays (I know because I walked along this stretch every schoolday last year), eastbound traffic on Military is backed up for blocks (usually from Reno to 42nd Place) and it stays this way intermittently until around 6 pm many weeknights. Already, it's difficult for pedestrians to cross Military anywhere along the stretch between Reno and Wisconsin and traffic accidents at 42nd and Military are a biweekly occurrence during some times of the year. Frustrated motorists respond to the congestion by zipping up the shoulder of the road (putting pedestrians and bikers at even great risks) or peeling out of the line and racing down residential streets (like ours) to get around this bottleneck.

Mercifully, neither the Washington Clinic nor the Lisner Home contribute to these problems – neither has a vehicular entrance on Military Road and, because of the nature of those buildings, neither generates a lot of traffic at rush hour. (Cars trickle in and out of Washington Clinic – I guess that's the nature of doctors' offices). But to add more than two hundred households to that little triangle of land, as well as businesses (there will be employees for the apartment building, as well as retail employees and customers) is to take a barely tolerable traffic situation and transform it into something nightmarish. (What happens when traffic on Military backs up two more blocks as people (on foot or in cars) exit and enter Stonebridge's new complex? Suddenly Wisconsin Avenue will be affected by the traffic jam on Military.)

Current zoning reflects the existence of the Metro stop and allows substantial residential development of that parcel of land. The Courts of Chevy Chase, recently built just across Military on 43rd Street, prove that it's commercially viable to develop the Washington Clinic parcel as residences under the existing zoning. There is no need for a zoning upgrade to make good use of the land in question.

The only possible benefit I can see to this project is that Stonebridge makes a greater profit than it might otherwise. But I'm assuming that the goal of zoning laws isn't to maximize profit for developers, right? Isn't it to preserve and enhance the quality of life for people living in the city? A playground for Chevy Chase Plaza Childrens' Center (of which my daughter is a proud alumn!) doesn't constitute an amenity. It saves a couple of dozen kids, most of whom don't live in the neighborhood, from walking 2-3 more blocks to Livingston Park, where they've always played quite happily. (Come visit and watch them walk by my front door daily, laughing and singing. It was a great ad for the Center – it's why I sent my daughter there.) And we don't need more retail when there are always vacancies in Chevy Chase Pavilion, Mazza Gallerie and the smaller surrounding retail strips.

I welcome more residences in my neighborhood – our house was “urban-infill” and so are a number of other homes nearby. But we can expand the neighborhood while retaining what's so attractive about it only if residential development stays within the existing zoning guidelines and focuses on townhomes rather than high-rises. There's no shortage of apartment buildings with easy access to the Friendship Heights Metro – there are high-rises galore in Maryland to the north and west of Wisconsin & Western. But that scale makes no sense in the heart of a neighborhood of two to four story houses. The Washington Clinic and the Lisner Home are built on a compatible scale and have served as a graceful transition between the residential and commercial sectors of Friendship Heights. That's an amenity worth preserving. It's a wonderful thing to be able to live in a city where you are just blocks away from stores and restaurants and movies but where the air doesn't always smell like a traffic jam, where it's safe to cross the streets, and where you can hear the birds and see the trees. Don't enable Stonebridge to destroy that. Please turn down their application and leave the zoning as it is.

I don't know if your decision-making process usually includes visits to the site in question, but I urge you to come out and see for yourself what is at stake. I'll even show you around!

Sincerely yours,



Suzette Hemberger
5415 42nd St., NW
Washington, DC 20015-2913
(202) 364-8423
smithhemb@aol.com