

TESTIMONY

of

Gary G. Stevens

before the

ZONING COMMISSION OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

on the matter of a

**Petition for Text and Map Amendment to establish § 1516,
Forest Hills Tree and Slope District, Case No. 02-19**

September 5, 2002

Good Evening Madam Chairman and other members of the Zoning Commission.

I am Gary Stevens. I live at 3100 Chesapeake Street, N.W. within the proposed Forest Hills Tree and Slope District. I am testifying on behalf of myself and the Forest Hills Neighborhood Alliance, a District of Columbia non-profit corporation dedicated to the preservation of the historic character of the Forest Hills neighborhood and its homes and landscapes of historic and architectural distinction.

The Alliance is a grassroots organization which has over 400 supporters in Forest Hills, the vast majority of whom reside in ANC Commissioner Kogan's single-member district (3F-01) and ANC Commissioner Maudlin's single-member district (3F-03). As reflected in my letters to the Zoning Commission dated June 11, 2002, the Alliance, including its board of directors and its 26-member Executive Committee, strongly support the proposed overlay as amended by the applicant. I would like to address three points concerning the overlay:

First, the Forest Hills Neighborhood Alliance began over two years ago when a group of Forest Hills neighbors became concerned over the status of the Owl's Nest, a turn-of-the-century residence designed by Washington architect Appleton Clark, situated on over two acres of park-like land in the center of Forest Hills. The Owl's Nest is also in the center of the proposed Tree and Slope District.

Last year the Alliance was successful in obtaining D.C. historic landmark status for the Owl's Nest, and the Owl's Nest has since been nominated for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. The Owl's Nest site, including its towering trees, is a neighborhood treasure. The Alliance estimates that at least 20 of the trees on the Owl's Nest site are ancient oaks well over 100 years old, exceeding 30" in diameter with heights well in excess of 120'. Another 30-40 trees on the site average 15-30" in diameter and appear to be in the 75-100 year age class. Altogether we have counted more than 100 trees on this site and the adjacent one-acre lot at 3017 Gates Road. These majestic trees are prime examples of why our neighborhood is called Forest Hills.

The Owl's Nest is currently up for sale, and I shudder to think of what will happen to this irreplaceable landscape if the site is overbuilt. Once these giant oaks have been destroyed, they cannot be replaced in our lifetime and perhaps not even in our children's lifetime. For this reason the Forest Hills Neighborhood Alliance strongly urges the Zoning Commission to keep the Owl's Nest property in the proposed Overlay District.

Secondly, I would like to address the issue of minimum lot size in R-1-A districts within the proposed overlay. The proposed overlay would establish 12,000 square feet as a minimum lot size replacing the current 7,500 square feet. According to the Office of Planning's report, the average lot size in Forest Hills is 14,044 square feet and median lot size is 9,810 square feet. If we are to maintain the character of the landscape in Forest Hills, the minimum lot size has to be increased. The 12,000 square foot minimum in the proposed overlay is appropriate. It would allow a substantial amount of subdivision but still preserve the large open spaces that accommodate the large trees in Forest Hills. However, what is important here is not the statistics, it is preserving the essential character of our neighborhood. To appreciate this, just drive through Forest Hills or better yet walk through it. I invite you especially to walk down Chesapeake Street or historic Grant Road on either side of the Owl's Nest, just two blocks off Connecticut Avenue. It is a truly remarkable setting, and because of the open park-like character, these beautiful old trees are a great benefit to everyone who lives in Forest Hills and walks down these streets, whether they live in houses or in the apartments that line Connecticut Avenue. Increasing the minimum lot size in R-1-A districts benefits everyone in this important respect. If we don't increase the minimum lot size and in-fill development continues to take its toll on our unique landscape, we will be taking the forest out of Forest Hills.

Finally, I would like to address the issue of community support for the proposed Tree and Slope Overlay District. I have not taken a scientific poll of our neighborhood, but I have conferred with the board of directors and the Executive Committee of the Forest Hills Neighborhood Alliance and informally with many of the Alliance supporters who are my friends and neighbors. I have gone house-to-house asking my neighbors how they feel about the tree and slope overlay

and if they believe the overlay would be helpful or merely intrusive. I can tell you that the response I have received has been overwhelmingly in favor of the overlay and that the more people know about the details of the overlay, the more they support it including the increase in the minimum lot size.

The proposed Tree and Slope Overlay, like any zoning regulation, is essentially a compromise property owners make for the common good. My house is on a lot that is currently sub-dividable under the 7,500 square foot minimum lot size. My immediate neighbor Tilly Kronheim's house is also on a lot that is sub-dividable. Several other neighbors just down the street from me on Brandywine and Davenport also have sub-dividable lots. All of us will be restricted in some sense by increasing the minimum lot size to 12,000 square feet but we will all benefit immensely from this restriction because the overlay will preserve and enhance the quality of life in Forest Hills and will in all likelihood increase our property values. On the other hand, if we all sub-divide into 7,500 square foot parcels the character of our neighborhood will change forever and for the worse. That is why so many of my neighbors have joined me in supporting the proposed overlay.

I strongly urge the Commission to adopt the amended overlay, including the 12,000 square foot minimum lot size, without delay.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak.