Gretchen Ellsworth

June 5, 2003

Testimony before the Zoning Commission – High School Boathouse Coalition
Re: Case #02-30, Georgetown University Boathouse

On behalf of the High School Boathouse Coalition on the Potomac River, I urge approval of Georgetown University's boathouse. There are many cogent reasons for doing so. From the point of view of the high school crew community, the Georgetown University boathouse is a critical first piece in solving the space crisis faced now by the high schools on the Potomac. From the point of view of public planning, it is past time to move ahead with the carefully vetted plans to accommodate rowing in the eagerly awaited Georgetown Waterfront Park.

The Scholastic Boathouse Coalition came together two years ago to confront the looming space crisis. It includes all 13 schools rowing on the Potomac at Georgetown. The coalition has been working intensely with the National Park Service, the Universities and Guest Services Inc. to solve this problem. Personally, I have worked for high school crew for years, had sons who rowed at Wilson High, am an officer of the 40-member National Capital Area Scholastic Rowing Association and of the Potomac Boat Club, have served on the Georgetown Waterfront Commission and its boathouse committee since 1997, and been active in promoting increased care for and use of the Anacostia River. I'm an active rower.

What's important about high school crew?

Rowing, as I saw with my sons and their teammates, makes amazing contributions to the lives of these youths, especially development of a love for and understanding of the river, and of personal discipline and unparalleled teamwork. It recruits new generations into the ranks of people fighting for respect and care for our waterways. And until you have seen sometimes jaded young people come alive and embrace a difficult and demanding sport, you may not fully appreciate crew's positive influences. That experience has moved me and many others to stay involved all these years later. For parents of current rowers, it inspires them to organize, fund and conduct crew programs at their schools, to eat and sleep crew. That's why the Commission is hearing from so many high school parents, because they know what the sport does for young people, and they know that time has run out to wait to create adequate facilities for the sport.

Lack of boathouse space is now a crisis

Rowing is a signature sport for the Potomac, originating here in the 19th Century. It enhances the life of the river. Its growth in recent decades has, happily, included major expansion in high school rowing. Rowing demands ready access to the water, and facilities where the long and delicate shells can be safely stored, and launched daily on the water for practice and regattas. Yet interior storage capacity on the Potomac for storing shells has not seen any net increase since at least 1960. Now, at last, in conjunction with the planning for the Georgetown Waterfront Park concrete plans have

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been laid to meet the needs. The Georgetown University boathouse is the linchpin in moving the plans forward.

There are 13 high school programs, four collegiate programs and hundreds of adults rowing as individuals or with clubs at Thompson Boat Center and at the Potomac Boat Club. A conservative estimate of the number of athletes rowing on the Potomac is upwards of 1500 – there are more than 800 high school student athletes alone. Some 60 of their shells are stored at Thompson Boat Center in an insecure and very temporary outdoor space. Even this make-shift home will be history when the Swedish Embassy is constructed in the next couple of years. They desperately need permanent storage space. When the University leaves Thompson's space will open for some 20 shells, and begin to solve the temporary problem.

As the plan envisions it, Georgetown's boathouse development will be followed by George Washington University's creation of a boathouse near Key Bridge, and by Guest Services Inc. creating a new facility next to Jack's Canoes for singles and doubles, canoes and kayaks. Finally modest renovations expanding capacity for 8-person shells in and onto the Thompson Boat Center will accommodate indoors the remaining shells now stored outdoors. Only when all these measures are taken will secure and long-term storage be a reality. Until then, many of the high school programs are hanging by a thread.

Thoroughness of planning for the Georgetown University boathouse

Having been part of the Georgetown Waterfront Commission's boathouse committee for five years, I know the University's boathouse planning has been exposed to much public scrutiny and full discussion. Every month for five years, public discussion was had about many subjects concerning the much-desired Georgetown Waterfront Park. Issues of the building of boathouses were interlaced through all of these discussions. The 1989 designation by the Park Service of a boathouse zone included the very site where Georgetown proposes to build, a site which throughout has been treated as a viable and appropriate location for a new boathouse. The Waterfront Commission's boathouse committee initially saw active participation of a number of people, including members from the Canoe Club who, unfortunately, ceased early on to participate.

Because this information has been published and publicly debated over so many years, it is most unfortunate that objections are raised at the eleventh hour. The Georgetown Waterfront Park has been decades in the making and many, many citizens, not just the rowing community want to see momentum developed and progress made on the Park. The high school rowers are at serious risk of losing much that has been accomplished through their own and community efforts over the years. We ask that the Commission permit the Georgetown University boathouse to proceed.

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