COALITION FOR the Capital Crescent Trail

P.O. Box 30703
Bethesda, MD 20824

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DC Zoning Commission
441 4th Street NW, Suite 210
Washington, DC 20001

Subject: Testimony Of the CCCT In Case No. 02-30 (GU Boathouse)

Dear Commissioners:

My name is Ernie Brooks, and I am the Chairman of the Coalition for the Capital Crescent Trail (CCCT). I represent the Coalition's Board of Directors, its 2000 active members, and the thousands of users of the Capital Crescent Trail in the District of Columbia. The Coalition was formed in 1986 to lobby for the placing of a first class trail for hiker/biker/jogger/blader usage in the disused railroad Right-of-Way (ROW) running from Silver Spring, MD to the Georgetown waterfront in Washington, DC. In the intervening 17 years, this trail has been essentially completed, with no intrusions into its corridor over the entire length of the former Georgetown Branch Railroad.

I appear before you tonight in opposition to the boathouse proposed for siting on Tract 102-114. One of the reasons for the great success of the CCT is that it has a spacious feel as it proceeds through the C&O Canal National Historic Park, and any development within that Park will result in a diminished Trail. Based on our instructions regarding this hearing, we understand that we cannot request that the property remain unzoned, but we would ask that at most the property be given a W-0 zoning and the special exception for a boathouse use be denied. Given the possibility of a W-0 zoning, and a special exception for boathouse usage, some of my comments are directed at mitigating the negative impacts of such a decision. Those comments are in no way meant to imply an acceptance of the appropriateness of such development for Tract 102-114.

The tract you are considering for initial zoning begins approximately 300 feet from the southern terminus of the CCT (as defined by current restriction to non-emergency vehicular traffic), and it abuts the CCT for approximately 450 feet. Currently the CCT is a paved trail, located in the center of the 30' wide former railroad ROW. The trail has a paved width of 10 feet, with soft shoulders on each side, of approximately 2 feet in width. In addition the trail has from 5-8 feet on either side of the soft shoulders before encountering either the embankment of the C&O Canal Towpath on one side, or the wooded area on the other. This spacious setting will be completely altered by the proposed boathouse access road. The paved portion of the trail will be shifted from the center of the old ROW, approximately 10' to the north, to a point where the north edge of

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the pavement will be located at the base of the slope of the C&O Canal embankment (at some points, cutting into the embankment). This shifting will do away with the soft shoulder on that side, as well as the 5-8 feet of "breakdown" area. On the south side of the trail, and within the CCT ROW, a new 15' wide access road (12' of roadway and a 3' buffer) to and along the boathouse site will be located, eliminating the soft shoulder and "breakdown" area on that side as well. This altered trail will run within the CCT ROW for approximately the first 800 feet of what was previously restricted from vehicular usage. Given the high volume of users on the CCT in that area, we should be thinking about increasing its width rather than reducing it! Georgetown University (GU) has stated that they will have infrequent need to access their boathouse by powered vehicles, yet they will have effectively more width than the incredibly busy CCT if the new entranceway is installed. If this plan is approved as presently designed, the many thousands of Trail users will be squeezed into a 10' wide corridor for the entire 4,380 daylight hours available in a year, so that the GU service vehicles can have their access for a total of a few hours each year. This seems, at best, unbalanced. The applicant has stated "all in all, neither operation of vehicles nor congestion of people will impede the free flow of bikers and pedestrians on the CCT". While we disagree with that statement, especially the assertion of no impact from vehicular traffic, much more important is the impact on the free flow of trail traffic on a 24/7 basis due to the narrowing of the trail from 14' to 10'. This is no suburban bike trail. It is the most heavily used trail in the metropolitan area, and every inch has been built to 14' because that is what is required to handle the user load. For comparison purposes, as best I can figure, the CCT will have more user visits in a week than the GU boathouse will have in a year!

A question has been raised by Commissioner Hood regarding the belated opposition to this proposed development, and I would like to take a few minutes addressing why the Coalition did not object until recently. Beginning in 1996, representatives of our Board attended meetings on the waterfront development, and they were told on several occasions that it was in the Trail's best interest not to oppose this project, as its construction would eliminate the possibility of a similar development approximately one mile further up the CCT, on land already owned by GU. We were also told that the upstream tract was of the same size as the proposed site, and that it carried with it an ingress/egress easement out to Water Street. We accepted that in good faith, and while we did not like the intrusion on the park, there was apparently no recourse. As a matter of fact, the presence of that upstream parcel has essentially led to a mantra for folks advocating for putting GU's boathouse on Tract 102-114, "Save the CCT by building the boathouse near the eastern end", although their treatment of the Trail at that end hardly seems to be coming from anyone interested in its users. Earlier this year, we gradually became aware of facts that cast serious doubt on the validity of some of those claims. First, and foremost, while being the same size from an acreage point of view, the upstream parcel is, to put it mildly, not properly shaped for a boathouse. It is an elongated rectangle, being 45' in depth, and running approximately 1080' along the old railroad ROW (now the CCT ROW) and it has frontage on the Potomac River for only the downstream third of its length. Also, the access easement ends at the eastern end of the parcel, so access from one end of the 1080' length to the other would have to be along an access road located on the property, reducing the maximum buildable footprint width to

approximately 33'. The parcel is approximately 15' below the level of the CCT, and its northern property line falls somewhere along the base of the fill slope for the railroad bed in that area. This would likely further reduce the footprint width to something like 30'. When discussing the requested Zoning Variance for the proposed site, the Applicant, the Office of Planning, and other supporters have referred to Tract 102-114 as being "narrow". I wonder what adjective would be used to describe the tract currently owned by GU, given that it is less than half the width of this "narrow" site? How exactly did GU plan to build its 78' boat bays (perpendicular to the river), its 46'x93' rowing tank, and its 40'x72' exercise/party room on a 30' wide footprint? Further, that tract has been under water several times already this year. Add to that the opposition that the NPS would be expected to bring to building anything in that area, and the public pressure to not disrupt the CCT, and it is extremely unlikely that anything would have been built there.

As the expression goes, "upon further review" we find the previous argument given to us justifying this intrusion on the CCT to be far from compelling, and even somewhat questionable.

My purpose for precisely describing the upstream property goes beyond pointing out how we were not given all the information that an organization should have before deciding whether or not to support something that will impact its members. It also goes to the issues of compromise and fairness. Let's make a comparison between what the applicants started with: a "super" narrow piece of land, subject to flooding at an annoying frequency, located relatively far away from their campus and the main rowing activities; and what they are getting: a much better shaped piece of land, ideally located with respect to their campus, dry except during serious river flooding, and full river frontage across the full length of the site. For sake of argument, let's say that the Commission decides to place W-0 zoning on Tract 102-114, and grant a special exception for a boathouse. Given all the other benefits that GU gets in being able to build on this site rather than the one they currently own, should all the neighbors, or those who use facilities neighboring this site, also be asked to sacrifice so that GU can get every single thing they want?

Here are some areas of compromise that could lessen the impact of a boathouse on Tract 102-114 on the CCT and its users.

Based on ASHTO Standards, the minimum overall width for this type of trail is 14'. We have even maintained that width on numerous bridges and tunnels along the CCT, where width is at a premium. In this instance, at a minimum, any service road for tract 102-114 should be located on that site once it gets to the property line, instead of inside the CCT ROW as presently designed. Given that there is some extra space at the eastern end of the CCT on the northern side, as well as the fact that the Washington Canoe Club (WCC) angles away from the trail as it heads to the west, a trail/access road combination could be designed so as to not squeeze the CCT at all if the access road were to be located within tract 102-114 once it reaches that property.

Further damage to the CCT comes from the size and location of the proposed boathouse itself. At present, users of the trail traveling towards the Georgetown end are greeted by a view of the Potomac River and the Key Bridge as they come around the final bend heading in that direction. That view will be completely blocked by the proposed boathouse, both because of its enormous size relative to anything else in that area (nearly 300 feet in length, and heights varying from 40 to 60 feet), and its location right up against the old ROW. Entering the trail from Georgetown, users are currently greeted almost immediately by a most natural and pleasing setting, including a sense of spaciousness. With the proposed boathouse, they will be greeted by a walled canyon, in which the trail will almost never see the sun. As a matter of fact, given the sun's location in the southern sky during the winter, trail users who venture out after this boathouse is constructed, can look forward to shadows and ice along that section of the trail. While we recognize that many CCT users are paying little attention to the details of whatever view is presented to them as they bike to and from work, or do a serious jog to relieve their daily tensions, or perhaps just go for a hike to engage in a bit of daydreaming, there is a noticeable difference between the natural setting that currently exists, and even the most understated and attractive structure one can imagine. Photos of these views are included with my written testimony. I encourage you to study these photos before making your decision, and ask yourselves while viewing them if those are views you feel comfortable taking away from the general public. I will note for the record that the architectural renderings of the boathouse as seen from the CCT, which we recently received, are very misleading as far as the Canal embankment slopes are concerned. In addition, the photo of the river supplied by the applicant to illustrate the rowing courses has a gross misrepresentation of the upstream parcel currently owned by GU. I would be happy to review those with you during any question and answer period following my main testimony.

Again, should the Commission decide to proceed with a W-0 zoning, and grant a special exception for boathouse usage, we would hope that it would include in a Zoning Order some limits on the building size and location to mitigate its negative impacts on the CCT and adjacent parkland. By reducing the height of the main roofline to that of the nearby WCC (or to the "building rising no more than 40' above grade" agreed to by the NPS, The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and DC SHPO in their October 1998 Memorandum of Agreement), the structure would not completely overwhelm the CCT, not to mention that the river views from the C&O Canal Towpath would be preserved by such a height limit. Putting the access road inside Tract 102-114, presumably along the southern property line of the CCT ROW would further lessen its impact on the Trail. Shortening the building's length by some 75' would allow the preservation of the open field located on the eastern end of the property, and would also preserve year round views of the river and Key Bridge from the CCT, not to mention conforming to the strict footprint limit of 15,000 sq. ft. noted in the previously mentioned MOA. These size reductions could be easily accomplished by removing the non-river dependent features of the boathouse, i.e. the rowing tank, and 2nd floor party/exercise room. The applicants have referred to this 40' x 72' space as only an exercise room, but I haven't seen any exercise rooms with a fireplace at one end and panoramic river views at the other, not to mention 24' ceilings! In addition, until very recently, the official web site of the GU

Athletic Department (gohoyas.com) pointed out to its readers that they should all look forward to the great parties they would be having in that room. Also on that site, there was a listing for room naming opportunities. Interestingly they indicated that the "Party Room" was being named in memory of Father Healy. Now I'm sure the good Father was a strong proponent of exercise, but I can't imagine that having his name on an exercise room would be the highest honor the University could bestow on him in this edifice. The applicant has stated that the only way to lower the overall height would be an unattractive flat roof. I would think a 10-12' ceiling in an exercise room would be another solution to this problem. Would it be nice to have such features on site? Of course it would. Is it necessary? Not at all, especially if locating those activities on campus would greatly lessen the visual and physical impact of this site on its surroundings.

Finally, there is the impact to the trail from having service vehicles and boat trailers using the adjoining service road. Georgetown University has acknowledged that the trailers will likely cross onto the trail when backing the boats in at the far end of the property, and given the narrowness of the entranceway, it is highly likely that any vehicle using it will wander over onto the pavement of the CCT. Given the few times each year that racing shells will have to be transported to and from the proposed boathouse, we would recommend that the boat trailers stop at the end of Water Street, and the shells be walked in from that point. Having watched the video of the Thompson's Boathouse operation, it is clear that the crews can easily manage walking the shells for the required distance, and this would remove one more vehicular intrusion from the Trail corridor. As a matter of fact, we cannot see why any vehicles other than emergency vehicles, or service vehicles required for repairing or replacing components of the physical plant, should have access to the site. No shuttle buses or drop off cars; no cleaners; no caterers; etc. If GU wants convenient access to its site, it should be proposing an on-street location. We would strongly encourage the Commission to include such restrictions on vehicular access through Zoning Orders if they should decide to vote in favor of the applicant

In closing, we would like to suggest that the solution to the problem is not swapping the GU owned tract for the one you are considering here, but instead swapping it for one of the sites along Water Street where a boathouse could be located with full street access, and no impact on the Capital Crescent Trail, or the C&O Canal National Historic Park, in which it is located.

For all these reasons, I encourage you to protect the Capital Crescent Trail, and the interests of its many users, by denying the proposed boathouse location. Short of that, I encourage you to protect the pre-existing interests of all those currently using this area by limiting the size and scope of any boathouse that you approve.

Respectfully,
Ernie Brooks
Chair, Coalition for the Capital Crescent Trail



