Testimony by Richard Layman

Regarding Case 04-22: National Capital Childrens Museum & Abdo Development LLC

before the District of Columbia Zoning Commission
Thursday January 27th, 2005

Good evening. My name is Richard Layman and I have lived in the neighborhood and the city for more than 15 years, and I have been a key participant in many of the successful neighborhood revitalization efforts over the past few years, including leading a historic preservation study that was funded by the DC Historic Preservation Office, serving as one of the leaders of the effort to create H Street Main Street, and raising (with others) more than one million dollars ($1 million) for neighborhood revitalization activities.

I am a member of Near Northeast Citizens Against Crime and Drugs, where I lead efforts on land use and preservation matters, and I serve as a community member of the ANC6C Planning and Zoning Committee. The testimony I provide is my own, but does reflect the sentiments of many.

As a committed neighborhood advocate, I am pleased that this matter is before you today. The Children's Museum, while always a treasured part of the community, has never been truly committed to its northeast quadrant location, always pining for a location closer to the city's major cultural institutions.

Yet the same reason that I thought the Children's Museum should have preferred Square 751 as the site for a national museum–its adjacency to the best transportation asset in the region–Union Station, with subway, bus, and railroad services, parking, and 20+ million annual visitors--has attracted Abdo Development, and led to the proposal to convert this well-located site to housing.

We are well aware of Mayor Williams' initiatives to attract "100,000 new residents" to the city. This is essential to build the revenue and social capital base of our city. It is particularly important to the H Street corridor, which needs additional residents in order to attract to the commercial district the kinds of businesses the community says it wants, such as grocery stores, restaurants, business services, cafes, and other establishments, the availability of which many other neighborhoods across the city are fortunate enough to be able to take for granted.

I favor this project. There are many reasons to do so as it:

- Brings more residents to the neighborhood, which will support the revitalization of the commercial corridor;
- Brings new housing to the neighborhood without the loss of any current units;
- Provides additional housing supply which can reduce overall displacement pressures in the greater neighborhood;.
- Provides more units of affordable housing compared to any other unsubsidized housing development in the city, in advance of any inclusionary zoning requirements that the Zoning Commission may enact;

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- Supports the District Government's transit-oriented development initiatives, by providing higher-density housing close to Union Station and downtown, housing that encourages transit use rather than automobile use. The Senate Square development should attract residents who choose to be transit-dependent rather than car-dependent. This should appeal to all potential residents regardless of income. While this is common behavior in many parts of Northwest DC with good transit connections, where as many as 80% of residents in high-density buildings **do not own cars,** it is still "cutting-edge"thinking in a neighborhood that too-often still thinks car first;.
- Restores the distinctive facade of the original Little Sisters of the Poor convent and poorhouse to the quality level of the Secretary of Interior's Standards for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings, even though Abdo Development is not required to meet these standards, because while eligible, the building is not listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

As importantly, by taking on the Children's Museum project, Abdo Development becomes the first major developer in the neighborhood that is truly committed to quality in all aspects of design, rehabilitation, and construction.

Categorically, it is fair to say that all of the new construction in the neighborhood heretofore has been unsympathetic to the historic architectural character that defines the neighborhood–the late 19th- and early 20th-century predominately brick rowhouses of Victorian and other styles, and the early 20th century industrial architecture along the railyard built to take advantage of the proximity of Union Station and the Baltimore and Ohio Freight Terminal.

The Little Sisters of the Poor building is one of the more significant and earliest constructed buildings in the neighborhood, as it dates from 1872, the same year that the Columbia Horse Car Trolley was built on H Street, which opened up the neighborhood to development.

The Convent bracketed on the east the Irish Catholic "Swampoodle" neighborhood, which was bracketed on the west by other Catholic institutions such as St. Aloysius Church, Gonzaga College High School, and convents. (This neighborhood was first demolished in favor of the Tiber Creek tunneling project and then by the construction of Union Station.) It is one of the oldest buildings north of F Street NE and south of Florida Avenue.

Abdo Development intends to develop Square 751 in a manner that respects its unique setting, bridging both the industrial-commercial-monumental architecture and engineering works on the west, and the late 19th- and early-20th century predominately brick Washington rowhouse architecture to the east. This will be done in a manner that makes the neighborhood, the commercial district, and the city more attractive and successful. If you doubt my assertion, just look at Station Place, which pays little respect either to the strikingly beautiful Beaux-Arts Union Station which lies on its west or to the residential neighborhood to its east. Station Place was an opportunity lost. Senate Square is an opportunity not to be squandered.

H Street truly benefits from the setting of high standards and expectations that demand quality, quality that is of a much higher level than "better than cinder block." For that, I and many others,

appreciate the entry of Abdo Development into our neighborhood. (This point is covered in more depth in the attached article that I wrote about design issues on the H Street corridor, which appeared in the October 2004 *Voice of the Hill* community newspaper.)

In closing, I want to point out that sometimes we forget that a particular development is not able to solve all the particular policy concerns and ills of the broader city or metropolis. Too often, planning and land use decisions are based on numbers and ideas from five years ago for projects being built today, when what matters is where the neighborhood will be in five, ten, and fifteen years.

It is essential to think of this site in its transit context, as it lies within an 8 minute walk to two different subway stops, and is located on a likely to-be-constructed streetcar line along H Street that will provide through service to Georgetown.

Many people approach automobility as the primary concern in land use decision-making. Shouldn't the automobile be subsidiary to pedestrian and transit mobility if we are to continue to define the District of Columbia as an livable, pedestrian-centric, urban place?

To that end, I appreciate that in this project, Abdo Development is attempting to provide the maximum number of parking spaces, access to either or both the Zipcar and Flexcar car sharing programs, street access to H Street, a goodly number of affordable housing units, in a sensitively rehabilitated historic building, that is adjacent to two attractively designed, newly constructed residential buildings that are architecturally sympathetic to both the residential and industrial heritage of the neighborhood.

That is why I recommend to the Zoning Commission that it rule in favor of the application before it in Case 04-22.

Respectfully submitted,

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H Street Main Street Update

(Re)Building an Attractive and Safe Environment on the H Street Corridor

BY RICHARD LAYMAN

The Main Street Approach (*www.mainstreet.org*) to commercial district revitalization is a volunteer driven effort that identifies and capitalizes on existing assets. Local assets—historic buildings and quality independent businesses—fuel successful Main Street initiatives, because such assets are the building blocks of a unique destination and the source of competitive advantage compared to traditional suburban shopping and entertainment venues.

Volunteers Work

The design committee, chaired by Brendan Danaher, with the able assistance of Stanton Park Neighborhood Association stalwart Drury Tallant and many committed neighborhood residents and stakeholders, is charged with enhancing the physical appearance of the commercial district by rehabilitating historic buildings, encouraging supportive new construction, developing sensitive design management systems, and long-term planning. This includes transportation, parking and clean and safe activities.

Design may be the most important of the committees. It's difficult to attract investors, businesses, and customers to an uncongenial and rundown commercial district. Improvements in storefronts—new paint, moderate renovation or full-scale rehabilitation—are often the first visible signs that something positive is happening, signaling to the community that exciting changes are taking place.

H Street is showing positive signs of change, due in part to the activities of committed volunteers in programs like H Street Main Street, and to government investments in programs and buildings. Still, we must not forget that the private investment and commitment of property owners who came in ahead of the recent spike of interest in the corridor has set the stage for the improvements that we are

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beginning to see today. Key to the success of these efforts has been a concern for quality.

These investors, whose commitment is signified by the fact that they have businesses based in the buildings they own, include David Bernhardt (Luna Laundromat at 410 H Street and other properties), Stuart Bennett (Language Doctors at 500 H Street), and Bruce and Adele Robey, proprietors of the H Street Playhouse (and publishers of this newspaper) at 1365 H Street.

David Bernhardt's purchase of Luna Laundromat is a good example. He reconfigured the interior to accommodate his studio, maximizing the revenue capability of the building. He installed glass doors, opening to the street the facade and the interior, and he decided not to install security gates. According to Bernhardt, "I wanted to create an environment that was like nicer neighborhoods and retail areas of the city. Security bars and gates reinforce the perception that H Street is a bad neighborhood."

While Bernhardt did think about installing bars, he decided to trust his judgement that H Street was improving. "I bought one of those big roll-down doors but it was ugly and clunky and I didn't put it up." In more than three years, Bernhardt believes that had he installed grim security mechanisms he would have had more problems than the two unsuccessful attempts he experienced. Openness increased safety. Bernhardt also decided to live above his shop, becoming the first new shopkeeper to do so in decades.

Bernhardt then bought and rehabilitated 421 H Street (he subsequently purchased 417 H Street as well), in part because its negative appearance threatened the success of his business. Fondly remembered from the days when H Street thrived, 'Toyland" had degenerated under absentee ownership and devolved into one of the biggest problem properties on the corridor, known for loitering, squatting, drug use and other nefarious activity. "Before I owned it, 20 people a day were going in and out to shoot up," said Bernhardt, "The first weekend after I bought it, I brought in a construction dumpster and we took out 90 cubic feet of trash, 40 people helped me, and we filled up the first dumpster load in less than an hour." That was the beginning of a major change in the western end of the corridor. Today the building is rented and a source of stability in a once troubled block.

Positive changes such as these spark additional private investments. A friend of Bernhardt's bought and renovated another building on the 400 block. Buildings on the 500 block have been renovated and occupied, including 500 H Street, which had been vacant for many years and now is the home of two separate businesses, The Language Doctors and BellArchitects, in a building that is well-maintained on grounds that are attractively landscaped.

At the eastern end, the creation of the H Street Playhouse has sparked the development of an arts and entertainment cluster and likely made the environment more favorable for the renovation of the Atlas Theater. Such investments boost the confidence of others and have led to improvements by property owners such as O.K. Chung, who renovated his building at 1100 H Street, including taking off boards and replacing second story windows that had been covered up for more than two decades, and Delores Montgomery, who beautifully renovated the facade of her property at 1307 H Street.

In addition to private investment (including the commitment of Abdo Development to the conversion of the Children's Museum site to residential use), the DC government has committed a great deal of financial support to H Street improvement initiatives, including Facade Improvements (Department of Housing and Community Development), the "Expressive Signs Project" funded by the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities with support from the DC Office of Planning, loan forgiveness for the Atlas Theater (DHCD), and a $30 million commitment to streetscape improvements (DC Department of Transportation). The Design committee leads HSMS involvement in the majority of these efforts.

Expressive Signs

Derrick Woody, commercial revitalization specialist at the DC Office of Planning, and author of *Thrive: A Guide to Storefront Design in the District of Columbia*, suggested the development of a more interesting and expressive signage vocabulary in the city's traditional commercial districts. In 2003, the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities initiated a program to work with local artists and individual building owners to create and install commercial signs that incorporate artistic elements.

Sherry Schwechten and Rachel Dickerson of the Arts Commission manage this project, with the input of a Steering Committee including members of the HSMS Design committee. While there has been a steep learning curve, and the program has taken a bit longer than expected, the results have been worth the wait. Thus far, three signs have been installed—a decorative tile sign at Park Hardware, 920 H Street; a stained glass window featuring the scales of justice on the second floor at the offices of attorney Phyllis J. Outlaw & Associates, 412 H Street; and a metal and plastic sign featuring street sign images at Imagine U Unique, 1012 H Street. The signs add a great deal of visual dynamism to storefronts on the corridor.

By the end of October, eight more signs will be installed, including at the H Street Playhouse. Additionally, three more signs are in process, for Subterranean and the Rhythm and Beans Café (two restaurants that will be opening in the coming months), and for The Language Doctors.

It is hoped that the existence of more artfully designed signs will encourage other businesses and raise the bar for higher quality signage along the H Street corridor. Plans for night lighting the signs are underway. This will be complemented by the facade restoration of the Atlas Performing Arts Center, which upon completion later this fall, will feature the nightly lighting of the fully renovated Atlas marquee.

Facade Improvements

In the last two years, DHCD has contracted with the H Street Community Development Corporation for facade improvements on the H Street corridor. As with the Expressive Sign program, there was a steep learning curve and recognition of the length of time that properties experienced disinvestment. As a result, it was discovered that more serious and expensive renovation work was required than had been anticipated in the planning phase.

In September, HSMS was notified that its proposal to assume the management of the H Street Facade Improvement program was accepted. HSMS intends to add to the $250,000 awarded by DHCD by including $200,000 in monies that were earmarked to H Street facade improvement by the Dreyfus Corporation. This was a result of the Zoning Commission Order concerning rezoning for the Station Place development. This project will be managed by the design committee.

Graduate Student Studio Projects

This fall, the design committee will be working with an architecture studio class from Catholic University in developing "block-by-block" visions, renderings, and plans for the H Street commercial district. The committee is also working with the historic preservation studio class from the University of Maryland on the development of historic preservation plans and projects for the historic fabric that remains on the H Street corridor. The plans produced by these classes will complement the broader vision laid out in the H Street Strategic Development Plan and provide more specific guidance to H Street Main Street relationships with property owners and other stakeholders in shaping plans for renovation, infill development, and retail business recruitment campaigns.

Streetscape Improvements

The design committee continues to be actively involved in the H Street Streetscape and Transportation Study Plan. This DDOT study was led by Ward 6 Transportation Planner Rachel MacCleery, with the assistance of the Baker Corporation as the consultant team coordinating the study. This plan was discussed in great detail in the May 2004 *Voice* (see "H Street Transportation Study and Streetscape Plan Presented," page 54-55). Rachel MacCleery has left DDOT for the private sector, and all of us involved in the study wish her the best in her new endeavors.

At their September meetings, both ANC6A and ANC6C passed resolutions in support of this plan. The next phase is the development of detailed construction planning documents. It is anticipated that construction will begin in 2006. Most of us in the greater Capitol Hill neighborhood are familiar with the impact of streetscape improvements on Barracks Row—8th Street SE—and it is expected that similar results will obtain on H Street—as long as property owners and retail business proprietors are responsive to the opportunities that arise from such improvements.

To participate in the various activities of the Design committee, contact Brendan Danaher at *bjdanaher@yahoo.com*, or Dru Tallant at *dtallant@aol.com*.

Other News

The Economic Revitalization Committee is hosting a merchant mixer at 7 p.m. Oct. 21 at Mens Fashion Center at 918 H Street. According to the new chair, Arden Phillips, committee meetings are held every three weeks on Wednesdays at the H St. Main Street office at 961 H Street, NE. The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, Oct. 6. Interested volunteers can contact Phillips at 202-399-1262, or by email at *APDL98@aol.com*.

Richard Layman is chair of the promotions committee, H Street Main Street, and contributes this column to the Voice.

Do you know someone who should be in Rotary?

The Rotary Club of Washington D.C. is exploring the feasibility of creating a new Rotary Club on Capitol Hill. If you know a leader in his or her field, with good character, integrity and a genuine commitment to "service above self," now is the time to introduce this person to Rotary. It is envisioned that this club will hold weekly breakfast meetings at 7:30 a.m. on Capitol Hill.

For More Information Please Contact: Werner Fornos
202-544-3300 or 202-546-7207