Statement of Patrick J. Lally, Neighborhood Resident
Before the
Zoning Commission of the District of Columbia
Case Number 04-22
Abdo Development, LLC – 220 H Street, NE

January 27, 2005

ZONING COMMISSION
CASE No. 04-22
EXHIBIT No. 41

Thank you Chairman ~~Mitten~~ Hood and members of the Commission for the opportunity to testify before you this evening. My name is Patrick Lally and for the past 19 years I've lived at 715 Third Street, NE, which is diagonally across H Street from the property that is the subject of this hearing.

I would like to begin by sharing with you my great pleasure in finally seeing the prospect for this gateway property achieve its full potential as a catalyst for anchoring and revitalizing the H Street Corridor. During the many years I have lived in this neighborhood, I have never seen a redevelopment proposal of this richness, scale, and vision. I firmly believe that for the first time in my life, this multi-million investment will reinvigorate much of the adjacent vacant and underutilized commercial structures. This panel's wisdom in restricting the expansion of BP's gas station directly across the street from Abdo Development's property, now takes on added significance as a new future for this critical gateway now emerges with the prospect of residential development.

As a citizen who has been very involved in the District's land use and planning issues for the past twenty years – and in historic preservation in particular – let me also comment on Abdo Development's sensitivity to working with the community in forging a proposal that works for everyone. There has been open and easy access to the development process and a multitude of public forums for addressing the neighborhood's concerns with the developer directly. The result has been an admirably inclusive process for which Mr. Abdo should be commended. My initial concerns regarding height, vehicular access, and loading/delivery entrances have all been very satisfactorily addressed at this point. As I look at the success of his initiatives in other parts of the city and his manner in conducting business related to this property, I have a lot of confidence in the outcome of transforming this historic complex into a showplace that will make all of us proud.

My remaining recommendations to you concern the historic elements of the property, which warrant particular consideration. This building and the sisters that built it are enormously significant in Washington's social history and I've attached some of my research on that for the record. Let me preface this by saying that Abdo Development is no stranger to working with historic properties and that I am pleased with its proposals for this location. In fact, one of the strengths of this plan is that the new construction on the site will offset the costs of removing the non-historic elements and restoring the historic components of what used to be the Convent of the Little Sisters of the Poor and St. Joseph's Home for the Aged. Since this property is not a Landmark of the District of Columbia or a contributing structure in an historic district, I credit Mr. Abdo for embarking on a concept that proposes to highlight the historic features of the overall development. I have the good fortune of having neighbors who have lived in the shadow of this building for 92 years now…two brothers…and their stories of growing up in our part of Washington are peppered with allusions to the former Home for the Aged and the Convent. Serving at Mass as altar buys there…recalling the black horse drawn wagon that the sisters used to beg for provisions…seeing Eleanor Roosevelt visit there to serve dinner to the indigent aged…all this is a part of our history linked to that building that should not go away.

Let me encourage the Commission to recommend that Abdo Development engage the services of a qualified architectural historian to help determine what the restoration will ultimately look like. The sisters built this complex in successive iterations over 104 years and determining the best architectural solutions are complicated at best. In the absence of design review, I think securing appropriate expertise would be invaluable.

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Let me also strongly advocate re-establishing the now occluded "chapel entrance" closest to the intersection of Third and H Streets, NE. This would help to reinforce the connection between the building and H Street -- as opposed to any secondary link with the overpass -- as the primary and historic entry to the building. I can tell you that Victorian, Catholic, institutional structures like this have a very consistent design aesthetic comprising a central entrance backing up to a chapel and flanked by gabled wings. I've even provided a photograph of a similar building in Northeast Washington that was built about the same time as the St. Joseph's Home and remains intact.

Chairman Mitten and members of the Commission, with some added refinement on the historic part of the proposal, the proposal before you has such extraordinary merit that I wholeheartedly encourage you to approve the applicant's request. I look forward to the day when the approach to my block will be highlighted by this exciting project and the adjacent streets enlivened by a diverse array of new residents.

A Brief History of 220 H Street, NE
St. Joseph's Home and Convent of the Little Sisters of the Poor

By Patrick Lally

The building that was lately owned by the Capital Childrens' Museum was for 104 years the convent of The Little Sisters of the Poor and St. Joseph's Home for the Aged. It is an integral element in the history of Washington and the adjacent community. In 1868, The "Little Sisters" established its first American foundation in Brooklyn, New York, and soon had a presence in eight other American cities. These French nuns were well known for their special mission to the elderly poor. Three years later, Father Jacob Ambrose Walter, the fourth pastor of St. Patrick's Church – the oldest Roman Catholic parish in Washington City, invited seven of these sisters from France to come care for the aged poor at a building he provided them nearby at 924 G Street, NW. This house, next to the present day site of Carroll Hall, had recently been vacated by the community of the Brothers of the Christian Schools after it moved its school – what is now St. John's College High School – to a larger facility.

In the years following the Civil War, Washington's population was growing exponentially, but there was relatively slow progress in the delivery of basic services and few governmental provisions for social welfare. Federal assistance for the impoverished was practically non-existent. From 1860 to 1870, the city's population nearly doubled from 75,000 to 132,000 and by 1900 that number would again double to 279,000. Even before the onset of a decade-long depression following the Panic of 1873, the area was beset with chronic postwar poverty, social disarray, and lack of housing. This, combined with the urban influx of domestic refugees, European immigrants, and the disenfranchised, fueled Father Walter's recognition of the urgent need to provide for those in the District without family or financial support. The city's needy came to depend heavily on private institutions for assistance and a large portion of these were operated by religious affiliations. Private individuals who wished to help in some way customarily used these organizations as the conduit for their donations. So, by 1871 Walter had firmly established his parish's leadership – through its St. Vincent de Paul Society – in a wide range of postwar charitable activities including asylums for orphans and relief for the city's indigent aged.

The Little Sisters of the Poor has ministered to the indigent aged from its early days. It was founded in 1839 in Brittany, France by Jeanne Jugan, who at 47 took into her home and cared for an impoverished elderly blind woman. Jugan, beatified in 1982, relied on begging to support her charitable work along with two other religious women. Their efforts led to the formation of the religious congregation of women we know today. The Little Sisters maintains a worldwide network of 216 homes with 3,300 sisters in 32 countries – 32 homes are in the United States. Its constitutions are based on the Rule of St. Augustine and its members take simple and perpetual vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, to which they add a fourth, hospitality. It receives into its Homes aged men and women – of all faiths and races – who have no other shelter, and who, to the best of their ability help the sisters in the daily operation of the Home. For the support of its foundations and in the spirit of the mendicant orders, the Little Sisters is

dependent absolutely on charity, having no fixed income or endowments, and most of what it receives the sisters procure through donations.

The horse drawn "long black wagon" that carried a pair of nuns dressed in their black habits with Breton kerchiefs was a familiar sight in Washington from 1874 to about 1930. The Little Sisters used the vehicle to collect contributions of food, clothing, tobacco, and money for its Home. Begging is an essential element of this religious community's approach to fulfill its charitable mission, but in an era of relative reserve associated with social welfare activities, the Little Sisters soon attracted considerable attention and political support in late-nineteenth century Washington. This political support aided its efforts and soon after arriving to the city the sisters were granted unprecedented permission to beg for donations in the buildings of the federal government.

Such favor among Washington's Catholics and non-Catholics was immensely helpful when the Little Sisters outgrew its first Home at St. Patrick's after only two years. In 1872, Fr. Walters, who was then preparing his own campaign to build the present St. Patrick's Church, helped the Little Sisters find property at 220 H Street, NE, on Square 751, a relatively undeveloped area just one block west of what had once been the graveyard of St. Peter's parish on Capitol Hill and on the eastern fringes of the Irish immigrant slum neighborhood called Swampoodle. The cornerstone for the first wing of the building was laid on May 6th of that year and it was ready for occupancy on the March 19th, 1873 – St, Joseph's Day, in honor of the congregation's patron. The sisters' solid base of support among many of the city's influential and politically connected citizens assisted them greatly in their remarkable ability to pay off in just two years the $31,000 for the land and first part of the Home. The tradition of appealing to the capital's social establishment in aiding the Home's mission continued with vigor after moving to H Street. The Little Sisters established an annual St. Joseph's Day dinner where many of the city's elite and members of the diplomatic corps would wear aprons and serve dinner to the Home's residents. Even First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt attended one of these gatherings in 1941.

The acquisition of property in this section of the city's northeast quadrant reflects the District's changing development patterns in the latter part of the 1800s – and it is particularly indicative of the congregation's desire to find an affordable, but well-situated property where it could build in stages a large facility for the aged poor. While H Street itself was one of the main east-west thoroughfares in the northeast quadrant, emerging from Swampoodle and leading to the Bladensburg toll gate, even as late as 1878 the Greene Washington Statistical Map shows that many of the lots and squares to the north and east of the Capitol remained essentially suburban or undeveloped. At that time Square 751, undoubtedly because of the presence of St. Joseph's Home, had a higher land assessment than any of the neighboring squares for some distance. Even at the going rate of 50 cents to a dollar per square foot, this was still far below the real estate values in St. Patrick's downtown neighborhood, which were among the highest in the city.

Early plans for Washington to grow eastward fizzled in favor of its expansion to the west. By the time the sisters were exploring locations to accommodate larger-scale institutional uses, properties in the relatively sparsely settled tracts north of H Street, NE, to Boundary Street, NE, (now Florida Avenue), were much easier to buy than those in comparable sections of the more

densely built northwest downtown. Not only was the appeal of the 200-Block of H Street, NE, the potential for expansion on the adjacent undeveloped lots of Square 751, it was also clear that this area was poised for change. The Columbia streetcar opened along H Street, NE, in 1871 and when "Boss Shepherd" became the official governor of the territory in 1873, he initiated an extensive public works plan that would eventually fill in the Tiber Creek, pave at least one-third of the city's streets, and create a modern sewer system to support the construction of over one thousand new buildings.

Square 751 was then physically separated from Swampoodle's shanty dwellings and the polluted Tiber Creek by the tracks of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad (B&O). Prior to the reconfiguration and consolidation of the rail yards when Union Station was built, the B&O right-of-way framed the length of Delaware Avenue, NE, (adjacent to Second Street) immediately to the west of the new St. Joseph's Home and extended around the block on Eye Street hugging the north end of the sisters' lot. Swampoodle, so called after the Washington Evening Star's description of the area surrounding St. Aloysius Church at the time of its 1859 dedication as a terrain of "swamps and puddles," was all but erased by the construction of Union Station and its rail yards in 1907. It straddled the blocks adjacent to the banks of Tiber Creek, which ran north-to-south a block and a half west of the Little Sisters' property between North Capitol and First Streets, NE, before turning west into the City Canal along what is now Constitution Avenue, NW. By the Civil War the Tiber and a tributary a block and a half to the south were open sewers. They contributed greatly to locally prevailing unsanitary conditions in the 1860s and 1870s. In anticipation of opening up this part of town to increased speculative development, the municipal government channeled them into culverts and filled in the creek beds in 1877.

In 1874, three influential Washington benefactors lobbied Congress to help the sisters to complete the main building and chapel. It is noteworthy that the House and Senate provided $25,000 for this purpose even in the financial depression following the Panic of 1873. General Benjamin F. Butler, Mr. James G. Blaine, the wife of General William Tecumseh Sherman, and Captain Wilkinson spearheaded this cause on the Hill. By then, Butler, a pro-civil rights, anti-slavery, supporter of Black military recruitment, was a powerful Member of Congress. Blaine, also in Congress, was a formidable political power in the city. Mrs. Sherman was the highly influential Catholic wife of the famous Civil War General.

Because requests for admission into the home were growing rapidly, Congress subsequently provided the Little Sisters with another grant of $5,000 to build a small frame house on the adjoining lot and it closed the public alley dividing these properties in 1881. This building offered the Home a facility for the care of elderly African-Americans. By the time the Little Sisters completed another wing in 1885 through a third Congressional appropriation of $25,000, St, Joseph's Home could accommodate 250 residents. In 1901, the Little Sisters acquired three more lots to encompass all of Square 751. At the same time, the B & O tracks were being consolidated into the new Union Station rail yards across Second Street and the Little Sisters constructed the brick wall that currently encloses the grounds. By then the complex's four-story gabled brick dormitories and connecting chapel was by far one of the largest buildings in the near northeast area, a landmark that could be seen at a distance rising above the residential neighborhood around it.

The facility continued to grow in stages and in the 1960's a large private donation from Edward C. Ernst allowed the Little Sisters to open a new 43-bed wing, auditorium, and convent addition. By the 1970's, however, construction of the six-lane H Street bridge brought the roadway within 10-feet of the front of the Home. A serious fire on the bridge followed by a car accident that caused a vehicle to jump the safety rail and crash into the sisters' property forced St, Joseph's Home to relocate. In March 1977, the Little Sisters moved from H Street and briefly left the District of Columbia before opening its present Home across the street from Catholic University in 1982. The building was vacant for a number of years before being reopened as the Capital Childrens' Museum.







