

Testimony Of Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC) 3D
By Thomas M. Smith, Chair
Z.C. No. 05-40 B – Request for a Modification of Approved Campus Plan Conditions for
the Wesley Theological Seminary of the United Methodist Church

Chairman Hood and Commissioners,

The Wesley Theological Seminary is located immediately adjacent to the Spring Valley residential neighborhood and serves as a partial buffer for the neighborhood with American University. ANC 3D was very supportive of the modifications of the Wesley Theological Seminary Campus Plan approved by the Zoning Commission in 2012 for construction of a new residence hall adjacent to the Spring Valley neighborhood. That construction was initially quite controversial among residents but the ANC worked with residents and Wesley to achieve a compromise and bring that consensus forward to the Zoning Commission for approval.

A group of AU graduate students, who were living in Wesley's Straughn Hall, contacted ANC 3D in mid-March to complain that AU would be entering into a master lease with Wesley to house AU undergraduate students. Until that time, ANC 3D was unaware that Wesley had been renting out space in its dorms to AU graduate students since 2014 when the new Wesley residence hall opened. The AU graduate students sought the help of ANC 3D to stop the master lease for AU undergraduate students because the master lease would mean they would lose this convenient and economical housing. We also heard separately from some Wesley students – all of whom are graduate level – who were alarmed that AU undergraduate students might be housed on the Wesley campus.

Meanwhile, ANC 3D and AU had been in what ANC 3D thought were very open, cooperative, and collegial discussions since January 2016 about modifications to the AU Campus Plan related to construction delays at the East Campus which would prevent occupancy of the new dorms in Fall 2016. This included discussions about alternative housing arrangements for AU undergraduates. But, AU representatives never mentioned that they were considering a master lease with Wesley Seminary for housing AU undergraduates. Even at an early March meeting of the AU Community Liaison Committee (CLC), AU never informed community representatives about the possible master lease arrangement with Wesley.

After hearing from the group of AU graduate students, ANC 3D reached out to Wesley and AU officials who confirmed what AU's graduate students and the Wesley students had told the ANC. ANC 3D then informed the affected citizens' groups – the Spring Valley-Wesley Heights Citizens Association and Neighbors for a Livable Community.

This is not a model for university-neighborhood communication.

To say we were disappointed that we had to hear this information from the students instead of the institutions, themselves, would be an understatement. We then worked closely with the leadership of the AU graduate students' group and Spring Valley residents, who also were not happy to hear about the proposed master lease, and reached out both to Wesley and AU officials to organize a forum for discussion of the issue. ANC and neighborhood representatives

requested a special meeting of the AU Community Liaison Committee to take this up and we invited the student group to participate. Wesley Seminary also participated. With the students' help, we learned that Wesley had institutionalized this rental housing program four years ago, that it was prominently featured on Wesley's web site, and that Wesley had targeted any AU student who was 21 or older. But, we also learned first-hand what this housing meant for this group of about 50 graduate students – most of whom were international students – who said they felt a special bond with other graduate level international Wesley students that resembled “family.”

Working with this group was probably the most rewarding experience I had had in my 10 years as an ANC Commissioner.

The willingness over time of AU and Wesley to back off a master lease for AU undergraduate students on the Wesley Campus enables us to support this modification to allow Wesley to house non-Wesley graduate level students on its campus unless the housing is needed by Wesley Seminary students.

Through frank and open discussion with Wesley representatives, we now also understand Wesley's motives for making this surplus housing available to non-seminary students. Enrollment has declined significantly and Wesley is experiencing a financial hardship and needs to plug a budget gap.

Given the institution's financial problems, what this housing means for struggling AU graduate students, and the fact that nobody in the neighborhood even knew or experienced any impacts from non-Wesley graduate-level students being housed on the campus, it seems reasonable and appropriate to support this modification.

However, we were disappointed to learn in our discussions with Wesley representatives that there were other provisions of Z.C Order 05-40A with which the Seminary was not in compliance. This includes the establishment of a neighborhood liaison group. Wesley has committed now to follow through and we will be vigilant in holding their feet to the fire on this commitment and we hope you will offer Wesley some encouragement to follow through as well. The experience of the last few months should elevate the importance of an effective liaison group for any institution housed in a residential zone, and we hope that Wesley will model its liaison initiative – at least in principle – after the Georgetown University Community Partnership of which ANC 3D is a part and that is might be the gold standard for neighborhood liaison.

We also realize that Wesley has not complied with requirements to conduct traffic monitoring studies. ANC 3D strongly encouraged these studies when the Campus Plan was modified in 2012 and it figured prominently in the compromise agreement with the neighborhood. Based on Wesley's finances and the Seminary's significant enrollment decline – which inevitably results in less traffic in the neighborhood attributable to Wesley – ANC 3D believes that Wesley should not be required to spend its limited financial resources on these studies at this time. Moreover, the residents living adjacent to the Seminary – and I am one of them – do not observe any objectionable conditions attributable to Wesley traffic. The same cannot be said for AU, our other institutional neighbor.

So, this puts the ANC at odds with the recommendation you have received from the Department of Transportation. After reviewing DDOT's report in this case, we question whether DDOT has even been to the site in recent years. Moreover, we find it strange and perhaps even unreasonable that DDOT is asking an institution of 400 graduate level students to conduct trip cap monitoring surveys when a 13,000 student institution next door – American University – is not subject to any similar requirement – and when DDOT has consistently argued that such a requirement is not necessary for AU. DDOT's recommendation in this case simply does not make much sense.

What troubles ANC 3D most about the DDOT report in this case is that the agency did not seem to miss any of the traffic studies that Wesley was required to conduct between 2012 and 2016 which were never conducted or filed with DDOT. We have learned – as a result of AU's proposed modification which is also on tonight's hearing schedule – that TDM and parking utilization reports required under the Zoning Order also were never completed by AU and filed with DDOT, as required. What is the point of requiring such studies if DDOT is not going to monitor whether they are completed and then take some action when they have not been filed, as required. Or does the burden for ensuring compliance with such requirements fall to residents who then must negotiate the bureaucracy and push DDOT to follow up with their responsibilities?

In short, we think DDOT's concern about the impact of Wesley traffic is misplaced. As neighbors, ANC 3D is working to ensure – within reason and without creating objectionable conditions for neighbors – that Wesley has the ability to get its financial house in order. The approach taken by ANC 3D seems more reasonable – if Wesley's enrollment increases to its 2012 level of 505, then Wesley would be expected to comply with the monitoring reports required in Z.C. Order 05-40B. If Wesley follows through with filing a new campus plan in 2019 – just a few short years from now -- a traffic study would be expected as part of that proceeding and would offer insights on traffic impacts at that time.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to testify.