

**Testimony by S. Joseph Bruno,
President of Building Hope...A Charter School Facilities Fund
to the Zoning Commission of the District of Columbia,
Hearing on the proposed text amendments to the
District of Columbia Zoning Regulations
(Charter Schools – Text Amendment)
Case No. 06-06
Thursday, May 11, 2006**

ZONING COMMISSION
CASE No. 06-06
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Madame Chair and Members of the Zoning Commission, I am Joe Bruno, President of Building Hope...A Charter School Facilities Fund. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this evening about the proposed amendments.

First, I would like to express appreciation to the Office of Planning for the proposed zoning regulatory amendments that assist charter public schools. Significantly, charter public schools have been clearly defined as public schools for the purposes of zoning. This is an important recognition that gives charter public schools the same status, recognition, rights and privileges as traditional District public schools. Other positive concerns, described in the testimony of those who are also speaking before the Commission at this hearing, are likewise welcome.

There are, however, some unwelcome proposals that would do great damage to the future of charter public schools in the District of Columbia. As President of Building Hope, it is my primary responsibility to provide facility funding for quality charter public school programs. In the formation of a charter public school, a visionary, energetic and dedicated group of school administrators, parents and community leaders come together to develop a unique program that seeks to meet the needs of children in the District of Columbia. Some schools focus on the arts, others on technology, still others focus on a classical learning program. Each school strives to offer parents of the District a quality choice for their children. As they are being chartered, and many times after the charter has been granted, new charter public schools experience difficulties in finding suitable instructional space.

It is no secret that the real estate market in DC is one of the most expensive markets in the nation. Today, like young families and low income workers in the District, small charter public schools struggle to find an affordable and suitable home. For practical purposes, some schools begin in an "incubator facility." Such a facility houses a "start-up" public charter school in its first few years of existence. These start-up schools begin with a small number of students and increase enrollment each year by adding classes and grades. Once it grows to a suitable number of students, they look to be housed in a larger, permanent facility elsewhere. For example, the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) public charter school program usually starts a new school with 80 students in its first year, 160 in the second year, 240 in the third year and 320 in the fourth year. At that point, they seek a larger facility for the students.

Today, District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) has over 6 million square feet of school space that goes unused. Despite this massive surplus, charter public schools have previously experienced little success in creating workable co-location scenarios with DCPS. Consistently, we have heard a powerful but small minority of public officials and civic groups speak out vociferously against DCPS and charter public school co-location scenarios. As a result, charter public schools have sought non-public space both in commercial and in residential zones. The proposed amendments pose no challenge to charter public schools seeking to locate in a commercial zone. In fact, the proposed

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amendments allow public charter schools to locate by right with sufficient off-street parking in the SP-1, CR and W zones. However, many schools find commercial zone offerings to be less than ideal, given their location and building types. So, these schools look to residential zones, in a large part because the school stakeholders want to educate children in a neighborhood environment. For many years, and in many neighborhoods, the presence of a school infuses life and energy into the locale. Rather than being seen as **only a traffic liability**, a residential neighborhood school should be seen as an asset, and a reminder that education is the foundation for the bright future of any community. And, it is in a neighborhood setting that children can learn to become good neighbors.

The proposed amendments changing the **residential zone requirements** will cripple small, new charter public schools as they seek to find space. These amendments likewise would hurt schools seeking an “incubator” facility. The minimum lot size has dramatically increased for public schools in the R-1-A and R-1-B zones to 15,000 square feet. For 50 students in a new charter public school, this requirement would make no sense. Assuming that a building on a 15,000 square foot parcel had a building on it with approximately 12,000 square feet of instructional space and an acceptable FAR of 0.8, the school would have 240 square feet per child. In our experience at Building Hope, we have seen that only about 100 square feet are needed per student. For a 50 student school, this would equate to a 5,000 to 6,000 square foot building. Thus, the current requirements impose a financial burden on a small school particularly seeking to locate in R-1-A and R-1-B zones. With these regulations, small charter public schools would have to acquire more than twice the space at twice the cost than is actually needed for their school. Charter public schools pride themselves on fiscal responsibility and prudent use of public and private funding. The acquisition of larger-than-needed lots and buildings by small charter public schools is neither responsible nor prudent. In about all cases, it is not even feasible.

Another potentially crippling amendment relates to the new minimum lot widths for zones R-1 through R-4. The proposed width of 120' of street frontage would allow for 5-6 cars to drop off children simultaneously. This requirement is designed to minimize the impact of school traffic in a residential area. In an ideal real estate market, namely, one favorable to inexpensive development, this requirement makes sense. However, most parcels of land in zones R-1 through R-4 do not have 120' of street frontage, but rather have a narrow street frontage. We believe that this requirement is not necessary and that the existing minimum lot widths should be retained. If a public charter school of 50 or so children were to be located in an R-1 through R-4 zone, many students would be using public transportation or would walk to school. The school administrators, in their desire to be good neighbors, could well enact student drop-off and pick-up policies that would prevent traffic jams in the neighborhood.

As partners with elected officials and residents in the District of Columbia, we in the charter public school movement want to respect the needs of all the stakeholders when it comes to public school zoning practices. We understand that neighborhood residents do not want their streets to become a traffic nightmare on every school day. However, we believe that the presence of small schools in residential zones will enhance neighborhoods without creating disruptive traffic issues. **By maintaining both the existing minimum lot area and minimum lot width for public schools in zones R-1 through R-4, the Zoning Commission will be acting in the best interests of public education without creating an undue burden on our District neighbors. Thank you.**