

Testimony of Donald Hense, Board Chair
Friendship Public Charter School
D.C. Zoning Commission
Hearing on Emergency Public School Zoning Regulations
May 11, 2006
441 4th Street NW, Room 220 South

Good evening. My name is Donald Hense, and I am the Board Chair of the Friendship Public Charter School. I am here today to express my opposition to the proposed Emergency Text Amendments to change public school regulations, initiated by the Office of Planning. Specifically, I am requesting that you reconsider the more restrictive minimum lot sizes and minimum lot widths in residential areas that will cripple our small charter schools. When I say “our,” I am referring to the **3,543** students attending the Friendship Public Charter School and the **17,473** students attending public charter schools in the District of Columbia, which represent nearly **one quarter** of this city’s entire public school enrollment.

In general, I have the following feedback with regard to the recommendations:

- **They are based on a faulty premise that there is no opportunity for public participation in the approval process for public charter schools.** Public charter schools are precisely that – PUBLIC institutions. The chartering authorities are required during the charter review and approval process, in accordance with the D.C. School Reform Act, to convene public hearings that are duly noticed. The public has the opportunity to hear each charter school’s plan prior to opening and to express opposition if they believe it is necessary.

- **They are also based on the premise that charter schools are subject to move**, which is untrue given that our goal is to enter into long-term facilities agreements or purchases to ensure the stability of our enrollment; and
- **They would place additional limitations on charter school development to such an extent that this initiative completely contradicts the general commitment that the District of Columbia has made to support students in public and public charter schools in an equitable fashion.** Public charter school students, like D.C. Public School students, are the sons and daughters of D.C. taxpaying residents who deserve to have the same right to quality educational opportunities and quality educational facilities.
- **Finally, implicit in the final report is the faulty assumption that public charter schools have elected to pursue facilities outside of those educational facilities in existence and under the control of the Board of Education, which oversees D.C. Public Schools.**

Given the misperceptions of public charter schools and our experience, I think it's helpful to everyone to hear a recap of the challenges that public charter schools have encountered with regard to facilities acquisition in the District since our inception.

- We began with the commitment that we would be given first preference in gaining access to vacant D.C. Public School properties. Although some charter schools were able to acquire these facilities, charter schools did not get the access that we were led to believe we would have. We instead encountered a slow and arduous bureaucratic process and observed that public school facilities could more easily be converted into condominiums or government offices than they could be maintained as

school buildings in the possession of charter schools. And, still there are under-utilized and vacant DCPS facilities.

- We were also presented with proposals for co-location with other schools. This idea was presented as a means of addressing the under-utilization of buildings occupied by DCPS schools with steadily declining enrollments. Once again, we found that we would not be able to occupy these buildings without challenges being posed by a resistant, inefficient, and ineffective bureaucracy. Yet **ANOTHER** roadblock stood in the way of us getting into suitable facilities.
- So, we moved forward – on to opportunities outside of the D.C. government and DCPS bureaucracies. We began to seek other properties throughout the District with the resources that we managed to scrape together. We rallied the support necessary to strike out on our own and get the facilities in place that our students and parents need and deserve. We did this because we had been forced to operate outside of the system that we thought would support us.

Now, here we are today, facing a proposal that will change zoning requirements and limit the opportunities available to charter schools that have been turned away from DCPS facilities. This is yet another proposal to stifle our progress and to prevent our parents and students from getting access to quality public education facilities. We sit here now staring in the face of opposition that will shatter our parents' and students' hopes and hinder public charter schools' progress **ONCE AGAIN**. This proposal, if accepted, will further exacerbate the shortage of available sites for us.

We ask that you reconsider this proposal as the school leaders who are simply here to meet the needs of the people who, I HOPE, are the most important to all of us – the taxpayers who are crying out for safe schools that truly educate the **17,473** students who have chosen public charter schools to educate their children and keep them safe during the school day. We are also the school leaders who sit before you understanding that we are the people who accepted the challenge to improve the quality of public education in the District of Columbia through the establishment of charters.

Please hear us when we say that this proposal will truly devastate our efforts to secure and develop suitable facilities for our students. Hear our plea that you take into consideration our past inability to access DCPS facilities before giving any further consideration to this proposal. Do not act hastily and leave our parents and students, who are also **YOUR VOTING, TAX-PAYING CONSTITUENTS**, unable to access quality public education.

We implore you to please reconsider the proposed zoning amendments as the proposal for new, more restrictive minimum lot sizes and minimum lot widths in residential areas will make it difficult for small schools to find small spaces in residential zones without being granted a special exception, which is extremely difficult to attain. Please help us to meet the needs of the taxpaying constituents who look to all of us for thoughtful service. The charter school community's goal to serve children is being overshadowed by the politics and bickering of adults. Let us begin working together to put an end to it. We must put the District's children, and our future, first. Thank you.