

Oral Testimony Of Dr. Jeffrey L. Kraskin, President
Spring Valley-Wesley Heights Citizens Association

The Spring Valley-Wesley Heights Citizens Association was established in 1952, so we've been part of many changes in the neighborhood – some of which we have vigorously opposed; some of which we have embraced enthusiastically; some of which have been improved by our recommendations.

Once the Zoning Commission granted a request on June 25 to delay this case, our Board has worked to get to a “YES” on this project. We shared this goal with Valor when we were invited to meet with the developer the day after the revised plan was filed with the Zoning Commission. It was the first time in the three year history of this project that Valor agreed to meet directly with us.

We outlined our efforts to get to a “YES” in a December 20 filing that Valor objected to and that was stricken from the record. Our filing broke no new ground because the neighborhood impacts of the project, as revised, were unchanged. Although we could not meet the filing deadline, but because the record was still open, we thought we had a responsibility to update the Commission; but continue to review the project in hopes that we might get to YES before this hearing began.

Tonight, we reaffirm our opposition to this project.

First, this project is too big and its scale is incompatible with the surrounding low density residential neighborhoods. This project will bring development better suited at a major Metro station, like Cityline at Tenley, to the Spring Valley and AU Park residential neighborhoods that consist almost solely of single family homes.

Second, the applicant cites compatibility with the 4801 Mass. Avenue Building to argue incorrectly that the building is consistent with the surrounding neighborhood. The 4801 Mass. Avenue building, which housed professional offices and first floor retail before being purchased by AU, was – when first built – and is still today out of scale with other existing commercial properties along Mass.

Avenue. Because its height could be measured at the time not from the operational front of the building on Mass. Avenue, but rather from a side entrance on 48th Street, it could be built as a matter of right and two stories higher than otherwise would have been allowed. Despite neighbors' objections about demolishing the Apex Theatre to build this box on Mass. Avenue, the Association could do nothing but turn its attention to the historic character of the neighboring shopping centers on both sides of Mass. Avenue. That is why these sites earned and were awarded historic designation to maintain their significance in DC's development history.

Third, the poor design of the project will result in new traffic and pedestrian safety problems. The alley system, on which this project relies, cannot support this project. The loading docks do not comply with any industry safety practices, as evidenced in Attachment B of our formal testimony. The sidewalks are not safe, accessible and do not conform to acceptable design standards, as outlined in Attachment C.

Fourth, Valor says the excessive density and scale is warranted because it will include 18,000 square feet of retail space for a grocery store. But, the site now contains roughly 40,000 square feet of retail space. Long-established neighborhood-serving businesses will be lost. Meanwhile, we do not live in a grocery store desert. As Attachment D to our written testimony shows, there is no shortage of Giants, Safeways, and Whole Foods within two miles of this site. And as Mayor Bowser recently announced, a new Wegman's will be built soon just about a mile away.

Fifth, Valor's refusal to share more information about its density transfer agreement means we have no clue how it may impact future land use planning for the Spring Valley Shopping Center. Under the laws of the District of Columbia, no historically designated site is immune from change. An additional building recently was added and connected to the historically designated Spring Valley Shopping Center, now referred to as Spring Valley Village, on the opposite side of Mass. Avenue.

There is an overriding public interest in knowing what limits are being imposed on the future use of this site and the long term effect of the density transfer agreement on the shopping center.

Sixth, AU is entitled to the use of 236 parking spaces on this site as part of a 1979 parking easement which has existed since the 4801 Mass. Avenue building was constructed. After three years of negotiations, according to Valor, there still is no agreement with AU on parking. Valor has reported that AU will have access to only 56 spaces. Until the AU agreement is finalized and included in the record, the numbers cited by Valor of how the parking spaces in the new building are to be utilized are meaningless.

Seven, we believe the opinions of those in our neighborhood who live closest to the site should be given special consideration in this case. The evidence of their opposition can be seen clearly from the 3-year old yard signs that STILL dot their front lawns opposing this development. 32 Spring Valley Court homeowners, who live closest in Spring Valley to the site, also have filed a petition in this case opposing the project. We are here tonight to protect their interests.

Finally, we still want to get to “yes” on a mixed use project at the site. But, we oppose development that is so poorly planned as this project and adversely affects the use of neighboring property – thereby failing to meet the requirements of Section 604.6 or 604.7 of the Design Review regulations. Thank you for the opportunity to present these views.