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Wednesday, June 9, 2022

MEMBERS OF THE ZONING COMMISSION

Anthony J. Hood - Chairperson Appointee
Robert Miller - Vice Chairperson Appointee
Joseph S. Imamura, Ph.D. - Architect of the Capitol
Peter G. May - National Park Service Designee
dcoz@dc.gov

Ref: Zoning Commission Case No. 22-13

Dear Members of the DC Zoning Commission (**ZC**),

My name is Robert Scholz. I was born and raised in the District of Columbia and except for college, and military service in Vietnam, I have been a DC resident.

For over 40 years, my wife and I have lived at 3900 University Ave., immediately across the street from the Wesley Theological Seminary (**WTS**). It is here where we raised our family and hope to live out the remainder of our lives. My wife is a retired librarian, and I am a retired civil engineer.

We oppose the application of the Wesley Theological Seminary Z.C. Case No. 22-13.

We support the opposition of:

**Spring Valley Wesley Heights Citizen's Association; and
Neighbors for a Livable Community (NLC).**

The reasons for our opposition are:

- **NO DEMONSTRATED NEED FOR ADDITIONAL RESIDENTIAL HOUSING FOR STUDENTS OF WTS.** The entire reason for this project is the financial support of the annual budget of the Wesley Theological Seminary (**WTS**).ⁱ
- **LARGE NEGATIVE IMPACT ON OUR RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY AND THOSE OF OTHER NEIGHBORS** living on University Avenue and in houses in the Northeast end of Spring Valleyⁱⁱ

- **WESLEY MISSION IS NOT SUPPORTED.**
WTS's STATED MISSION: *"to equip persons for Christian ministry and leadership in the church and the world, to advance theological scholarship, and to model a prophetic voice in the public square."* **How does this proposed eight story luxury high-rise commercial apartment project primarily for American University students support that mission?**
- **REAL ESTATE TAX FREE LAND FOR A COMMERCIAL PROJECT.** The proposed project is to be built on a 99-year ground lease on land free of real estate tax. **This seems to violate the intent, if not the letter of US and DC law that exempts land for nonprofit educational and religious institutions from real estate taxes.**
- **ACCOMMODATION OF ZC CREATED A DUBIOUS RIGHT.** Because the ZC accommodated the Seminary's overbuilding in 2014 by permitting AU graduate students to occupy the overbuilding, **how does this previous accommodation now, according to the Seminary's lawyer, establish a RIGHT of the Seminary to OVERBUILD AGAIN?**
- **AU HAS AVOIDED ENGAGEMENT WITH WTS ON THIS PROJECT.** The ZC has already approved an on-campus 500 bed dormitory building for AU adjacent to the southeastern property line of the WTS property. If ZC approves the WTS project and AU students do not come to occupy it, then what?
- **AT THIS TIME THERE IS GREAT UNCERTAINTY AND RISK.** As we come out of the pandemic, the increases in remote learning and remote work, the high cost of higher education, a looming recession, and the many students and families already burdened with high student debt, the future landscape of higher education is extremely uncertain. **At this time a luxury high-rise apartment residence for students is a risky undertaking for the residents of Spring Valley and for the Wesley Theological Seminary.**

In summary, (1) this application is not supported by demonstrated demand, (2) will have significant impacts on us and on the community on the northeast corner of Spring Valley and (3) is not supported by American University that has already received ZC approval for a large high-rise dormitory of its own on University Avenue.

Please, I encourage you to disapprove this application.

Very truly yours,

Robert R. Scholz

NO DEMONSTRATED NEED. In 2014 the Seminary completed construction of a new four-story, steel frame, tilt up, lift slab 67 bed dormitory facing University Ave. It has never been completely occupied, and the Seminary has recently reported that this 2014 building needs to be reconfigured to meet current housing needs.

- The United Methodist Church is the third largest denomination in the United States behind the Catholic and Southern Baptist denominations. Although Methodist membership is increasing in Europe, Africa, and in the Philippines; in the United States membership is declining. It's 6.8 million members in 2017 declined 100,000 during that year, and average attendance was only 2.5 million or 37% of membership. Kevin Dunn, Director of data collection services at the most recent United Methodist General Conference for Finance and Administration in 2018 projected an average 2% annual decline in following years, and by 2025 membership may fall below 6 million. He noted that United Methodist numbers are in keeping with overall US religious downward trends. The US seems to be moving away from organized religions.
- The Seminary's claim that this massive project is required for it to "thrive in place" is only about raising money.
- The two original residential buildings, if modestly renovated/reconfigured sequentially and as needed seem more than adequate with the new 2014 building to meet the present and immediate future needs for the housing of residential students. Renovating the existing buildings is the most environmentally friendly way to increase residential capacity.
- WTS might explore small educational pilot programs in community mediation, and other programs that serve the broader community.
- With an ongoing development program aimed at their 6 million membership base, large gifts from wealthy members, corporations, and potential grants from Charitable Trusts, perhaps the immediate and future financial needs will be sufficient to cover the annual operating costs and capital improvements of WTS. The real problem for WTS and the other twelve United Methodist Theological Seminaries in the United States is that they are all competing for contributions from a steadily decreasing membership base. Consolidation among the various seminaries is already underway, [e.g., "Claremont School of Theology in Los Angeles faces a court order to offer its Claremont, California, campus for sale to a nearby consortium of higher education schools and for a relatively low price." By Hodges, Sam, *United Methodist News*, Dallas, Texas, January 19, 2022]

ii NEGATIVE IMPACT.

- **Disruption During Construction.**
 - Noise, dust, and truck traffic from the demolition of three mid-century modern original buildings and the removal of debris, and the excavation and removal of dirt for the two levels of underground parking and for the foundations.
 - Possible blasting if subsurface conditions require it.

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- Trash from the food trucks servicing the construction workforces; and
 - Damage to property - for example the granite curb on Wesley circle was damaged when the large crane was removed from the 2014 construction site. The curb remains damaged today.
 - **Lights from windows facing Massachusetts Avenue.**

One of the current two-story above grade residence halls on the hilltop above our house which will be destroyed with this new project has six small windows facing Massachusetts Ave which are visible from our house. In contrast, on the proposed massive seven-story plus penthouse building, the entire side of the building facing Massachusetts Avenue will be predominantly windows, most of which will be visible from our house and those of neighbors during the “winter” months when the leaves are off the deciduous trees. It is unlikely that residents will close their blinds shutting out the nighttime view of the lights of Friendship Heights and Bethesda from this high-rise on a hilltop campus that towers over Spring Valley.
 - **Parking & Traffic.** At \$250 per month for garage parking, students will be tempted to park in the Spring Valley neighborhood and on University Avenue. Prior to the installation of the fence between AU and the seminary in the 1980s, it was at times difficult to find a parking space on University Avenue and side streets, and the proposed project will create a dramatic increase in traffic exiting onto University Avenue; and
 - **Possible misbehavior of students.** Soon after we moved into our house and prior to the installation of the fence between AU and WTS, several items were removed from our property and late-night loud student parties & hazing incidents occurred on the Seminary grounds across the street. The two previous presidents of WTS lived either on the campus or next to us on University Avenue. In contrast, the current president lives five or six blocks away from the campus in the new section in West Spring Valley. In the past after Saturday nights of AU merrymaking, neighbors would clean up the empty beer cans and other trash. The establishment of the fence between **AU** and **WTS** ended all of the student bad behavior issues on University Ave. Four hundred (400) to 500 students in the planned luxury apartment project of 659 will be **AU** students and no longer is there a restriction to graduate students; junior and senior undergraduates are also proposed to occupy the building.