

ZONING COMMISSION FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Thursday, October 17, 2024

FOR THE PURPOSE OF CONSIDERING THE FOLLOWING:

Z.C. CASE NO. 24-09 (THE WESLEY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH – Text Amendment to Subtitle C §1001.6(c) and Subtitle X §101))

Testimony of Alma Hardy Gates

Good Evening, I am Alma Gates, a Board member of Neighbors for a Livable Community (NLC). I am also a former ANC 3D Commissioner. NLC has done a thorough job reviewing the zoning issues in its prehearing submission at Exhibit 27, but there remain unresolved issues.

Wesley has chosen “Thrive” as the theme for its long overdue campus plan. Today’s hearing is the third in a progression of attempts that have not met with the approval of the Zoning Commission. At the same time Wesley is proposing to thrive through its plan, it is threatening to vacate its campus if its plan is not approved. Wesley has used this threat successfully in past zoning cases so it is being repeated now.

Monetizing Wesley’s campus is at the core of its plan to lease a significant portion of its open space to Landmark Properties to build and manage a 659-bed commercial student apartment building targeted at American University students. Wesley’s student population has been decreasing for some time, and as a result, it cannot fill the existing 2014 Dorm with its own students; but Wesley is planning to derive income from a new revenue stream – the American University student population.

A November 8 letter from AU to the Commission sets the record straight on discussions with Wesley. (Exhibit 24) It states:

“We have shared that AU remains focused on fulfilling our educational mission and future vision as detailed in our 2021 Campus Plan, which includes maximizing on-campus housing for our students. We are working to create a vibrant, high-quality on-campus experience for our students that promotes access to academic opportunities, community building, student retention, and progress to graduation.”

Wesley has proposed two text amendments to the Zoning Regulations which equate to “spot zoning.” However, Wesley’s proposed plan and text amendments are significantly weakened by AU’s statement regarding housing for its students on its campus. At this point, the amendments may be unnecessary. A special exception might be a better solution for the few AU students who opt to live in the Landmark student apartment rather than seeking a carveout in the regulations. Once the regulations are changed for Wesley, any DC institution is free to follow precedent and apply for a carveout.

The Zoning Commission is left with little to consider in its deliberations. AU has finally made its position clear and in so doing, squashed the necessity of Wesley's proposed student apartment building. Without the commercial student apartment building there is no need for the text amendments or the unresolved IZ requirements. And without the text amendments the existing zoning regulations prohibit Wesley's plan. However, Wesley would still remain without a Campus Plan. ANC 3D should be commended for its suggested solution - that Wesley move their operation downtown, buy a building and use it for academic, administrative, and housing needs.

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