

Advisory Neighborhood Commission 3D

Government of the District of Columbia



Testimony of Commissioner Chuck Elkins
on behalf of ANC3D
Case 24-09: Wesley Theological Seminary Text Amendments
November 18, 2024

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Zoning Commission:

I am happy to be here today testifying on behalf of the entire ANC 3D. You will find our letter with all of its attachments resubmitted as Exhibits 23 and 35A. To summarize: It is our view that it is just common sense that the Zoning Commission authorize the building of this dormitory by way of text amendments. Here's why:

First, we detail in our letter the reason we conclude that the proposed building does not pose any objectionable impact on the neighborhood.

Secondly, American University has 5000 students for whom it cannot provide housing on its campus and yet it has invited them to come to the District to study at AU but live off campus. These students take up housing that could otherwise be occupied by DC residents, including teachers, police officers and others. A Wesley dorm would help. It's disappointing that AU sees its obligation as only providing up to another 500 beds over the next 10 years.

Thirdly, while the two campuses, Wesley and American, are institutionally separate, for the neighborhood, from a land use perspective, it is one large property, Therefore a common dormitory makes a lot of sense.

We know of only four people who live close to the seminary who want Wesley to stay but who object to the building. Two are a couple who live directly across from the seminary and will be able to see the new building and two live nearby but out of sight of the building and are on the Board of Directors of Neighbors for a Livable Community.

What do these four neighbors say about the proposed building and our quick replies, all of which we address in more detail in our letter:

First, they say that we will have more students on the public sidewalks. This is true but it's hard to find the use of public sidewalks objectionable.

Secondly, they say they will be able to see the building. But if all buildings on campuses had to be located out of sight of the neighborhood, most our universities would need to leave the District.

Thirdly, they say the proposed building would add too much density to the neighborhood. This is not a proposal to build a McMansion right in the middle of a neighborhood of small houses. In short, density in and of itself is not, in our view, objectionable. It sometimes is, but not in this case.

Fourthly, they say, the building will hurt American university. Our answer that is that's not what American University says in its statement to this Commission.

Fifth, they argue that Westley will never leave so it is OK for neighbors to try to prevent Wesley from constructing this building. Our answer is that this is pure conjecture which we address in detail in our letter.

Sixth, they also argue that American university or other academic institutions will come to Wesley's rescue. Our answer is, there's no factual basis for these assertions.

Seventh, they say that ANC3D proposes that Wesley move downtown. This is simply a mischaracterization of our letter.

In essence, ANC3D believes the objections of these four close by neighbors are not a sound basis to object to this proposed building.

One of the witnesses in opposition implies in his statement that ANC3D Commissioners may be simply expressing our personal opinions about the project rather than those of neighborhood residents. This is really a silly argument. Here are the facts: ANC3D has held many open discussions about the Westley project. In 2023, we had 3 discussions, including a special meeting with a 2 ½ hour discussion and then passed resolutions at three additional monthly meetings. In 2024, we discussed and passed resolutions at five separate monthly meetings. Contrast this with how the two organizations in opposition have determined that they are not just expressing their personal opinions. You can ask them how many public meetings they held to learn neighbors' views. I think the answer will be same as usual-- Zero., Because I live in Wesley Heights, I am an automatic member of the SVWHCA, according to its bylaws. In my 38 years of living in Wesley Heights, I have been invited to only one public meeting of the organization and never had an invitation to vote on who is on the Board of Directors, since the Board elects its own members. SVWHCA is not a "normal" citizens organization. Neither is Neighbors for a Livable Community.

On the basis of ANC3D's multiple public meetings with neighbors, we can confidently say we understand and agree with our constituents in Spring Valley: namely, everyone wants Wesley to stay, including even the opponents at this hearing today, and most neighbors either find the proposed building to be OK or simply don't care, one way or the other.

The two organizations in opposition have brought forth numerous legal objections to the approval of these text amendments. They express great worry about the zoning regulations and any precedent that their approval might set. Certainly any legal issues brought forward need to be seriously considered by the zoning commission, but to paraphrase from Shakespeare's Hamlet, "methinks they doth protest too much".

Finally, on affordable housing. The underlying zoning here is RA-1, so if Wesley sold the property to a developer we would have single family homes by-right, likely large and multimillion dollar, with very few affordable options for anyone.

So we are concerned that the Commission give Wesley the flexibility to work out the affordable housing issue in the context of the campus plan and not accept the Office of Planning's suggestion to restrict that flexibility at this point in time. I don't know what the rules are, Mr. Chairman, but perhaps the

Commission could make its final decisions on both these text amendments and the completed campus plan on the same day in the future so that they can be appropriately coordinated.

We do urge your Commission, however, to move as quickly as possible. We shouldn't let the clock run out on this important decision for Wesley.