

TO: DC Board of Zoning Adjustment

FROM: Ann Hammersmith

RE: Case Number 19450: Special Exception/Variance at 3320 Idaho Avenue, NW

DATE: February 28, 2017

I am writing to express my concern regarding the D.C. Department of General Services' request for a variance and special exception in order to construct an emergency shelter at 3320 Idaho Avenue, NW.

I have several issues with the variances requested for the site of the homeless shelter:

The homeless shelter and the accompanying multi-level parking garage will destroy the neighborhood's character, create an eyesore, and exacerbate opposition to the shelter.

Allowing the requested variance will result in a building that is several stories and many feet above the current zoning requirement. The shelter will be much taller than the police station, as well as the adjacent single family homes and apartments. The shelter can be built on this site without exceeding height limits under current zoning by decreasing the size of the shelter and/or separating the shelter into two lower-rise connecting buildings, possibly with a common area in between for shelter residents. These are just two options for creating a shelter that fits into the existing neighborhood and is more "human scale" for the families who will live in the shelter. The current proposed design is institutional, uninviting to anyone who would live there for any length of time, and not a home, even a temporary one, for families with young children.

The U.S. Commission of Fine Arts noted these alternatives in its February 24, 2017, letter (BZA Exhibit # 206) to Greer Johnson Gillis, Director of the D.C. Department of General Services, which is the party seeking the variances. The Commission, which expressed similar concerns about building height and design for the shelter in Ward 5, requested an analysis of the Idaho Avenue site as a "master plan" and also requested additional study of "building typology, site planning and context." In addition, the Commission cautioned against building a shelter that is more institutional than residential.

The Commission's comments are well taken. The issues noted in its letter are similar to the concerns of many neighborhood residents and have caused some residents to oppose the shelter on this basis alone. The city's rushed approach on the zoning issue typifies its behavior regarding the entire project, e.g., a hurried community meeting convened on a holiday weekend with virtually no notice, followed by a claim of widespread community support, and city agencies bullying the ANC to vote in favor of the project or 60+ street parking spaces would be taken for police parking.

Taking the tennis courts and part of the Newark Street Garden for police parking will further erode the neighborhood's character and desirability, with no guarantee that the city will return the tennis courts or garden to their original states.

If adopted, the city's proposal for addressing police parking will create an eyesore for McLean Gardens' residents as well as adversely affect adjacent public space, such as the playground for very young children, the dog park, and the tennis courts. The city has already sunk a significant amount of money into the playground and the dog park. Why jeopardize that investment by making those public areas undesirable and potentially difficult to access?

The Newark Street Garden, which has existed for over 40 years, is a much beloved green space in the neighborhood. Taking half of the garden for parking will further destroy the neighborhood's character and we have absolutely no guarantee that the city would ever restore the garden plots it seizes.

More thought and creativity are needed here. Has the city investigated leasing a portion of the lower deck in the Cathedral Commons garage? Is there any space in the Cathedral's parking garage or in Vaughan Place's garage? The city should investigate and report back to the neighborhood about other parking options and their feasibility.

The price tag for this shelter seems to be accelerating rapidly, without any justification.

We are facing a shelter whose size has risen from 38 to 50 families and a multi-level parking garage that was not part of the original plan. The city is now asking for zoning variances that require outside counsel services, likely at impressive hourly rates. The city should report clearly and openly on the costs related to all of the smaller shelters in each ward to make sure that each site remains economically feasible and our tax money is wisely spent and achieves a good result.

In a February 28, 2017, letter to Frederick Hill, BZA Chairperson, Mary Cheh states that homelessness is a huge problem in the city, DC General is unacceptable as housing, and that Ward 3 wants to do its part. I agree with those assertions and believe that smaller shelters are better for shelter residents. Conditions at DC General are horrific and the structure should be razed. However, Ms. Cheh's argument generally supports alternatives to current housing for the homeless, but fails to address why the Ward 3 shelter must be built on the Idaho Avenue site, which requires zoning variances and special exception relief.

In addition, Ms. Cheh notes that Mayor Bowser has four requirements for short-term homeless facilities in each ward. One of those requirements is economic feasibility. The city, including Ms. Cheh, should report on increased costs for the Ward 3 shelter, as well as the shelters located in other wards, to ensure that the economic feasibility requirement continues to be satisfied.

I hope that the Board of Zoning Adjustment will carefully consider my comments as well as all of the other comments submitted by DC citizens. Homeless shelters should be sited and built in a way that causes the least disruption to neighborhood residents and the most comfort, support, and dignity to shelter residents. Building a shelter and parking garage that are eyesores for everyone is not the answer. I suggest that the city re-examine its plans for the Ward 3 shelter, report on other options for the shelter design and police parking, explain its rationale for its decisions, and most importantly, engage the neighborhood and the homeless in a discussion about the shelter in a meaningful way.

Thank you for your consideration.

Submitted on 3/1/2017 by:

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