

Timothy Harr
4106 42nd Street NW Washington, DC 20016

October 24, 2021

Frederick Hill
Chairman
District of Columbia Board of Zoning Adjustment

Re: BZA No. 20472 – The River School: **Opposition**

Dear Chairman Hill-

I am a member of the party in opposition, Tenleytown Preservation Association, and support TPA's recommendation to the Board to deny the referenced application. Simply put, the proposed development of the location by The River School (TRS) "will likely become objectionable to adjoining and nearby property because of noise, traffic, number of students or otherwise objectionable conditions" in violation of 11-U DCMR § 203.1(m)(1). I write as a nearby property owner to raise my objections to the proposed mass and institutional design of proposed buildings on the site.

TRS has stated that it is unwilling at this time to revise its plans to place large institutional-looking buildings on the perimeter of this site or to cure the objectionable physical appearance and visual impact of those buildings, which are incompatible with a residential neighborhood and unfriendly to pedestrians. TRS has significant work to do to incorporate design elements that would reduce the adverse impact of those buildings on the neighborhood and on everyone living, walking, playing, or doing anything else in the shadow of these buildings. The application simply is not approvable under Special Exception criteria in its current form.

I live two houses down and across the street from the tree-filled residential R-1-B plot on which TRS is now seeking to build a 60,000+ square-foot institutional development (a development that I firmly oppose as far too large for this limited plot in a residential neighborhood). If TRS were to build this project, every time I stood on the sidewalk in front of my house or walked to Tenley, the institutional buildings that TRS proposes to build on the perimeter of the site would loom up, as they would for hundreds of other neighbors, pedestrians, bikers, joggers, visitors, students, dog walkers, parents with strollers, etc., imposing a visual mass completely inconsistent with the planning goals

for an R-1 residential neighborhood and therefore certainly objectionable. Here is what the TRS drawings show (imagine this building going up across the street in a residential neighborhood of single detached homes):



When I first learned about the TRS plans from other neighbors, I sought information on the nature and design of the building that TRS proposed to erect in our neighborhood. Sadly, the building design plans in the TRS filings largely ignored the objectionable visual, physical, and emotional effects that such buildings would have on neighbors. Not only had TRS pushed the large buildings to the perimeter of the property, where they would have the most adverse impact on any nearby properties (instead of being set back toward the center of the site), but the blocky institutional building designs

shown in the TRS drawings would be particularly destructive to the neighborhood's feel, to the friendly streetscape, and to the residential and human scale of the area.

TRS's original design for the buildings was so completely inconsistent with an inviting residential human-scale approach that comments from one of the Historical Preservation Review Board included a reference to the buildings as "brutalist" in design. TRS, to try to get support from HPRB, lowered the buildings' height and redesigned the interior-facing facades of the buildings. While these proposed design improvements would improve the feel of the buildings for all the TRS people walking or working inside the ring of TRS buildings, virtually no such enhancements in design were proposed for the objectionable exterior-facing facades – the facades that neighbors, pedestrians, and anyone else passing by would encounter.

I questioned TRS on this apparent disregard for friendly placement, design and aesthetics with respect to the outside world, including the neighbors. I urged them to mass the buildings near the middle of the property, so the buildings would be at a distance and less objectionable to everyone adjacent to the property, but TRS refused. I then suggested to TRS a list of architectural design enhancements¹ (provided to me by architects) that are well recognized to reduce the inhuman and objectionable impact of institutional buildings on residential and pedestrian neighborhoods. Many of these design enhancement elements had already been added by TRS for the interior-facing facades, but none had been applied to the facades that neighbors would see.

In response, TRS first presented a set of landscaping drawings, which they asserted would one day in the future improve the streetscape for pedestrians. Second, they arranged a meeting that included their architect. At that meeting for a second time I went through the list of well-accepted architectural improvements that are widely recognized among architects as important to help institutional buildings blend into the

¹ The following are among the well-recognized design features that help make institutional or commercial buildings less oppressive to neighbors and friendlier to all who come in contact with such buildings:

- Muted earthen colors, and variations in the colors and texture to break up the mass
- Smaller, varied and more vertical windows, on a residential scale, to break up the mass
- Step-backs from floor to floor, or design features that give such an impression
- Greenery (especially evergreen) on walls, parapets, step backs, etc.
- Use of indentations, different angles, and ornamentation to reduce blockiness
- Use of varying textures, grillwork, and decks, to break up mass and create interest

residential and pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods, and thus be less objectionable. None of these features had been included in the TRS exterior façade design.

At the meeting, TRS and their architect did not disagree with my list and expressed an intent to implement some design enhancements to make the buildings less objectionable. However, TRS stated that it was unwilling to spend the money now to develop such design enhancements for the neighborhood-facing facades of the buildings (even though they had done so for the interior facades). TRS explained that because they might not be granted the Special Exception, they did not want to waste the money now to draft and vet such design improvements.

It is clear therefore that the proposed TRS building locations and designs in their current form are not approvable under the Zoning Regulations because they are exceedingly and legitimately objectionable to those living in the surrounding R-1-B neighborhood. The proposed development is too large for the parcel and its mass and its density of use are incompatible with a residential neighborhood, and that results in oversize institutional buildings pushed to the parcel's perimeter with objectionable adverse effects on the neighbors, compounded by TRS's failure to include mitigating design elements.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Timothy Harr", written in a cursive style.

Timothy Harr

Cc:
ANC3E Commissioners;
DC Historic Preservation Review Board
Councilmember Mary Cheh