

*Mary Louise Wagner
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February 26, 2022

Frederick L. Hill, Chairperson
Board of Zoning Adjustment
District of Columbia

RE: BZA Case #20643 – Maret School

CC: ANC 3/4G

Dear Chairperson Hill:

Thank you for the opportunity to express my views and concerns about the matter coming before the Board of Zoning Adjustment in Case #20643, the Maret School proposal to develop playing fields on the Episcopal Center for Children (ECC) property, located at 5901 Utah Avenue, NW, at the intersection of Utah and Nebraska Avenues, NW.

My husband and I are property owners at 5458 30th Street, NW, approximately 0.3 miles from the existing ECC property, and a 2-3 minute drive or 7-9 minute walk. We have lived in our house since 1995 and raised three children in the neighborhood, all of whom attended D.C. public schools, Lafayette Elementary School, Alice Deal Middle School, and Wilson High School. We walk in the neighborhood, we walk our dogs in the neighborhood, and when our children were younger, we walked to school and playgrounds in the neighborhood.

We have been supporters of the ECC since we moved to the neighborhood 26 years ago and remain supportive to this day. We support the mission of ECC and would like to see ECC able to continue to fulfill that mission. We are mindful of ECC's need for funding to allow that.

However, we do not support Maret's plan to turn the ECC property into a set of playing fields.

There are a number of key reasons for our opposition to Maret's proposal, including concerns about the environmental impact, issues of equity, noise, traffic, and overall disruption to our community both during the construction and operation period.

I would like to focus on two specific issues – 1) plans and schedules for construction, and 2) future plans for use of the fields, including traffic and parking management, once completed.

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We have yet to see any detailed plans or schedules for the construction period.

How does Maret plan to get from Point A (its 3D models of a completed field complex) to Point B (actual completed construction of gates, parking lots and fields)? In early February, I participated on a Zoom call during which Maret shared its 3D models. Arguably, many would consider the fields lovely when finished as envisioned in the 3D models, with a beautiful gate, parking spots, thriving green spaces surrounding thriving replanted trees, happy voices of children enjoying the fields and surrounding areas, and so forth.

But when asked about detailed plans and schedules for the period of construction, Maret had very little information to share, except for an ambitious hoped-for start date for use of the fields in 2023. It is as if Maret is Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz and simply needs to click her beautiful red heels together and suddenly everyone, including the neighborhood, will be transformed to a lovely set of fields that look like the 3D models. But what about the in between period? Maret will not need to live through that – but the neighborhood will. At a minimum, the neighborhood needs to be provided detailed plans on what will be done when, and how it will impact those around the property. ***Surely, Maret has more information than they are sharing with the neighbors and surrounding community. If they do not, they need to gather that information and provide it. Perhaps it would be useful to see some 3D models of what the construction process will look like, so the impacts can be fully assessed prior to any decision made by the BZA.***

What are the plans for use of the fields when completed, and what commitments will Maret make to the neighbors and surrounding community about future use?

Maret has said that the primary use of the fields will be for their school teams and that traffic impacts will be minimized by the use of buses to bring students and spectators to the fields. Maret has also proposed a gate on Nebraska Avenue and has seemed to dismiss concerns that vehicles going in and out of that gate will significantly change the amount of traffic on Nebraska Avenue and at the intersection of Utah and Nebraska Avenues and surrounding streets. Maret has seemed to dismiss concerns that increased traffic in this area could jeopardize the safety of pedestrians, families and children in the area. ***At a minimum, Maret needs to be forthcoming and transparent about the number of vehicles that will come and go and about plans for rental of the fields. If the primary purpose of the fields is the use by Maret, is the school willing to commit not to rent out the fields in the future?***

It is well-known that there is a dearth of available fields in Washington, DC, and that most schools and sports clubs scramble to gain access to fields for their teams. There is fierce competition for these fields, and fields are usually booked back to back with practices and games. There is a constant shift in players and families coming and going, and with that, vehicles coming and going, dropping people off, picking them up, parking for a while, waiting for parking spots, and so forth and so forth.

I speak from experience with fields in the Washington, DC area. For 10 years of our children's lives, we came and went to soccer fields, with two travel soccer players. Sometimes we were in one car with one player and one parent, sometimes we were in two cars with two players and two parents, or one player, and two parents, or two parents and one player, and so forth and so forth. Sometimes we had carpools, and sometimes as children became young adult drivers, they drove themselves, both increasing the traffic and number of novice drivers on the road. The point is that there will be increased traffic, and there will be people waiting for parking spots, especially during the shift between games. It is a well-documented phenomenon around fields in the area. ***Maret needs to open and transparent about its plans and the impact before any decisions are made by the BZA.***

Finally, our concerns about the Maret proposal are against the backdrop of a lack of trust and transparency in the process. Maret has not been forthcoming with information. Instead, Maret seems to be presenting a rosy picture and avoiding the difficult questions. A proposal as ambitious as this one will be messy during construction – there is no way to avoid that. It will also be more impactful on the community than Maret seems to realize – both during construction and once completed. ***Maret needs to recognize the concerns raised by the neighbors and community and respect their legitimacy by answering them straightforwardly and transparently prior to moving forward. That has not happened to date, and we respectfully request that the BZA not move forward with this proposal without first demanding further transparency and engagement by Maret with the neighbors and community.***

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Mary Louise Wagner
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Washington, DC 20015