

R O G E R K L E W I S  
architecture & planning 5034 1/2 Dana Place, NW Washington DC 20016  
professor University of Maryland School of Architecture, College Park, MD 20742  
columnist The Washington Post

f a i a  
tel: 202-363-0220  
fx: 202-686-8603  
tel: 301-405-6289  
fx: 301-314-9583  
rogershome@aol.com

November 14, 2002

To: Zoning Commission for the District of Columbia

From: Roger K. Lewis, FAIA

Re: 5401 Western Avenue, N.W.  
Zoning Commission Case No. 02-17C

I have reviewed and analyzed all Prehearing Submission documents, statements and design drawings sent to me by the applicant, Stonebridge Associates, Inc., and their attorney Holland & Knight LLP. I also have visited the subject site. Summarized below are my overall observations and findings regarding the proposed development, which are limited primarily to considerations of the project's urban design and architectural merits, including related matters of zoning, land use, density, height and open space. I have perused but not studied in detail the economic, traffic and parking analyses, plus the relevant legal arguments pertaining to the PUD guidelines and zoning amendment application, and therefore offer only limited comments about these issues.

#### Project Location

The proposed development, as currently designed, makes great sense. For the uses and density contemplated, its location at the northeastern threshold to Friendship Heights is more than suitable; it is highly desirable. In addition to enjoying excellent regional and local road access, the site is only steps away from the Friendship Heights intermodal Metrorail and Metrobus transportation station. Residents of 5401 Western Avenue easily could live here without owning or using an automobile. Not only is transit within easy walking distance, but also a multitude of uses vital to any community: major department stores, specialty shops, community convenience shops and grocery stores; offices, including doctors' offices; hotels; movie theaters; and numerous restaurants and cafes.

The project would meet one of the principal and most important goals of "Smart Growth" – walkable, transit-oriented development (T.O.D.) – which encourages denser, mixed-use development and/or redevelopment in areas already well served by existing infrastructure and, specifically, along transit corridors. The T.O.D. strategy is predicated on achieving economic, environmental and energy sustainability. By reducing future needs to build new, costly and functionally inefficient infrastructure, it ultimately reduces the public tax burden and relieves fiscal pressures on local governments. By ensuring mobility while reducing dependence on the private automobile, it yields a safer, cleaner environment. And by creating pedestrian-friendly, urban neighborhoods encompassing diverse services and populations, it improves the quality of life for T.O.D. residents. Thus any less intense use of this site would be an unjustifiable waste of a unique opportunity to fulfill Smart Growth and T.O.D. aspirations

ZONING COMMISSION  
District of Columbia  
ZONING COMMISSION  
District of Columbia  
CASE NO. 02-17  
EXHIBIT NO. 148

### Urban Design & Architecture

The site provides a unique opportunity to create a visual landmark. This gateway building promises to appropriately mark the transition from the established, lower density residential neighborhoods northeast of the site to the high-density, still developing commercial and multi-family residential node of Friendship Heights. In overall form and massing, the building as designed will successfully coexist with surrounding uses and buildings and relate well to adjoining streetscapes. Its height, geometry and multiple façade treatments will harmonize and be in scale with nearby structures and abutting properties. Yet happily the building doesn't replicate the mediocre commercial architecture across Military Road and Western Avenue. Equally important, the building holds the street edge of Military Road – as good urban streetscape buildings should – and serves as a strong, visual hinge at the acutely angled intersection of Military Road and Western Avenue. Further, its configuration preserves a significant amount of usable, south-facing, landscaped open space within the site. This mini-park will be a desirable amenity for both the project's residents and residents of the neighboring community, who will be able to traverse the site between Military Road and Western Avenue.

The project designers also have sensitively positioned the building's points of pedestrian access and lobby, parking garage access, visitor parking and vehicular service access. The building's main pedestrian entrances face both Military Road and Western Avenue and the Metro station, to and from which building residents will frequently walk. The underground parking garage entrance is wisely aligned with the signalized, Wisconsin Circle – Western Avenue intersection, ensuring safe ingress and egress and minimal congestion. Truck loading docks are located at the northeast end of the building, facing Western Avenue rather than Military Road, to further minimize traffic conflicts and expedite turning movements in and out of the building. The low-rise, day-care center building, also facing Western Avenue across from the Chevy Chase Center, will continue and punctuate the street-edge definition established by the apartment building.

### Traffic & Parking

This project, like so many PUD proposals, represents a significant change in the neighborhood, and it is not surprising that neighbors fear that it will generate more congestion and make parking on the surrounding streets more difficult. Indeed, in recent decades, claims of adverse traffic and parking impacts constitute the standard, persistent objection to virtually all development or redevelopment proposals in American cities and suburbs. Sometimes this objection is justifiable, but often such claims are exaggerated and occasionally wholly without basis in fact.

Given the proposed use and density in this case, the parking and traffic impact analyses and related mitigation strategies set forth in the Prehearing Statements seem altogether reasonable and credible. Generally apartment buildings do not generate peak-hour, high-frequency automobile trips or adversely affect existing traffic patterns in ways comparable to commercial and other types of uses. With its ample supply of on-site,

underground parking for both residents and visitors, and with its extraordinary access to the Friendship Heights Metro station, the impact of this project on the surrounding road network will be inconsequential.

In reality, Friendship Heights is no longer a suburban environment. Today it is an integral part of the multi-jurisdictional city that metropolitan Washington has become. And a healthy, vibrant city, by definition, has busy streets and sidewalks serving a dense mixture of diverse residential, commercial and recreational activities. Clearly 5401 Western Avenue will help make Friendship Heights healthy and vibrant, and it will do it without jeopardizing the quality of life of those who live and work nearby.