



## *Southwest / Navy Yard / Buzzard Point* Advisory Neighborhood Commission 6D

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September 24, 2020

Anthony Hood, Chairman  
Zoning Commission of the District of Columbia  
441 4<sup>th</sup> Street, NW, S200  
Washington, DC 20001

Submitted via IZIS

With a copy emailed to [DCOZ-ZCSubmissions@dc.gov](mailto:DCOZ-ZCSubmissions@dc.gov)

**RE: ANC 6D Report -ZC Case No. 20-14, 5 M Street Design Review**

Dear Chairman Hood and Members of the Zoning Commission,

At a regularly scheduled and properly noticed public meeting held on September 14, 2020, with a quorum present, a quorum being four Commissioners, Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC) 6D voted 7-0-0 to oppose ZC Case No. 20-14, a design review case located in the heart of ANC 6D, and **we urge the Commission to provide our conclusions on this case great weight under law.**

Also at the regularly scheduled and properly noticed public meeting held on September 14, 2020, with a quorum present, a quorum being four Commissioners, Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC) 6D voted 7-0-0 to authorize Chair Gail Fast to testify on behalf of ANC 6D.

The site under review sits at the confluence of cultures and communities in ANC 6D. Though just across South Capitol from the rapidly changing Navy Yard neighborhood, the 5M site is a world away and firmly rooted in residential Southwest, a community with a strong tradition of inclusiveness, diversity, and tolerance. Located at South Capitol and M—arguably the two most important streets in our ANC—this site presents the extraordinary opportunity to create a sense of place and serve as a gateway to Southwest. Unfortunately, the building put forth by the Applicant has squandered that opportunity. Instead of making a statement of welcome and inclusion, the Applicant’s plan is architecturally heavy-handed and domineering. It has failed to make a positive statement,

wasting the opportunity to demonstrate architectural transition from the mixed-use neighborhood on the east side of South Capitol to one that is predominantly – and successfully – almost entirely residential on the west side

M Street is the gateway to the Southwest Waterfront and The Wharf. A few blocks north of the 5M site, amid the sight lines to the Capitol building a few blocks north, the Randall School redevelopment just south of the highway serves as the bookend entrance into the Southwest residential neighborhood from the north along Eye Street from the east. Its design, set back from the street, with significant light and open space, combined with preservation of the building's historic structure, introduces residents and visitors alike to the neighborhood and blends aspects of the neighborhood's older structures with newer design concepts. ANC 6D had hoped 5M could serve a similar role on the southern side of the gateway to the Capitol. The Applicant's design does not.

Further, the design as presented creates a jumbled building of boxy squares and teetering windows within an imposing block of concrete. There is precious little room for air, light, or views except for those few lucky residents who will be afforded balconies with a view of the Capitol. The Applicant has suggested to the ANC that the design reflects various architectural elements of the Southwest neighborhood. Rather, that representation came only after ANC 6D raised objections that their plan addressed none of those elements. The Applicant then backed into a tortuous description of various aspects of their existing design purporting to show elements of Clothiel Woodward Smith here, Charles Goodman there and Keyes, Lethbridge and Condon someplace elsewhere. At best, this is design by tangential relation. No series of arrows focusing on a disparate and desperate hodgepodge can overcome the result -- an incomprehensible amalgam that is representative of nothing.

Were the Applicant truly serious about their desire to incorporate elements of Southwest design, ANC 6D encourages them to look toward Carrollsburg, Tiber Island, River Park, Riverside, and 700 Seventh Street – each of which provide balconies for every single one of their residents. In the time of COVID, brand new tiny box apartments and work from home, that is a design that we'd applaud. Were the Applicant truly serious about incorporating elements of Southwest design, they might look again to Tiber Island, Carrollsburg, Harbour Square and the recently approved Bard complex all of which successfully incorporate the overarching theme that Southwest is a community made up of varying building heights – even within the same project. Maybe the Applicant would even consider, as ANC 6D had requested, reorienting their building so that the lower portions of 5M front on South Capitol Street thereby creating a more visually compelling and physically welcoming entry to our neighborhood. And, of course the Applicant could always look toward Harbour Square whose landscape plan is notably included as part of their historic designation or to Carrollsburg whose courtyard was designed by Dan Kiley. Then the Applicant would understand why ANC 6D is so protective of our tree canopy and along with DDOT insist that the 5M design be amended to incorporate the preservation of several heritage trees in public space adjacent to their property.

Indeed, the Applicant made a vain attempt to show how their building 'fits' within the confines of the Southwest Small Area Plan (SAP). So there is no confusion, let's lay out the main Design Guidelines that are specifically spelled out in the SAP and are strongly encouraged in matter-of-right development.

**Principle #1:** Encourage a mix of building heights. Provide a massing and mix of defined building heights which compliment and uphold the mixture of high rise and low-rise building.

**Analysis:** This project is directly across from some of the oldest homes in the District of Columbia. Sanitary row homes line M Street and S. Capitol. The SAP explicitly details that large development sites should include the provision of rowhomes with high rise buildings. Below is a picture from the Bard development that shows how to incorporate townhomes as part of a high-rise building. This could easily be replicated in both of the Applicant's proposed schemes.



**Principle #2:** Achieve design excellence for high quality and timeliness development.

**Analysis:** Both schemes in this project include their “timeless” feature of Hollywood Square-windows. This industrial look of tissue boxes stacked on top of one another jutting out into pedestrian space is neither timeless or attractive. Nor does it follow Principle #3, which is detailed below.

**Principle #3:** Promote variation in building frontages along streets with continuous massing.

**Analysis:** Neither scheme promotes cohesive forms and design. In the mixed-use scheme, the Applicant has presented three distinct buildings: the office on M Street, the retail and the residential. Each of these plans is so busy that when placed side-by-side there is no continuity to the streetscape. Perspective 05 in the Mixed-Use scheme shows a projected overhang that moves to a flat retail and ends with an office entrance with a projected bay. Nothing about this seems unified.

**Principle #4:** Enhanced green space through landscaping

**Analysis:** Maintaining a green oasis is another of the guiding principles of the SAP. DDOT's report identified the location of one Non-Hazardous Heritage Tree that must be preserved and as such, would require the Applicant to redesign the site plan in order to preserve the tree. This tree is located at the intersection of Half Street and L Street. There are also several Special Trees, were also identified in DDOT's report, that are located on the private property that ANC 6D would seek to have preserved.

Additional thought should also be considered for the green amenity space. Since this project is adjacent to Lansburgh Park, ANC 6D would like to see the Applicant incorporate some public access to their green space.

**Principle #5.** Incorporate sustainable building and site design

**Analysis:** ANC 6D has not seen OP's report however OP has introduced a Flood Resilience Strategy that will include all of Southwest -- west to S. Capitol and north to the freeway. ANC 6D would like to see how the Applicant plans to meet the requirements that are set forth for new development in this plan in their project.

**Principle #6.** Ensuring parking is not a detractor.

**Analysis:** Based on DDOT’s report, the Applicant needs a non-restrictive easement with the owner of Lot 47. ANC 6D asks that the easement be finalized before this application is approved so we do not get stuck with the issue we have had with at-risk windows elsewhere in our ANC. Even though it is not zoned for residential parking, ANC 6D would request a clause in tenant leases indicating that there is an understanding that they will not be eligible for RPP.

Further, without a “proper trip generation,” there is no way for the ANC to analyze the impact on traffic. Nor has the Applicant provided any plans for its retail space. As the ANC is well aware, retail fronting a major street can lead to double parking and significant congestion. The Applicant has not addressed this issue.

In addition, the Applicant has not provided a clear and comprehensive lighting scheme for the building, leaving ANC 6D in the dark as to their plans for exterior lights and how they may alter the design of what we see in daylight. As the Zoning Commission may well recall, ANC 6D has been steadfastly opposed to all manner of lighting and signage that directly impinges upon the world class views north along South Capitol Street toward the Capitol dome. Also, you may remember our concerns regarding billboards on Nats Park and how they would impact the view North along South Capitol Street toward the Capitol building. The recent and very unfortunate proliferation of garish neon lighting on buildings in the Navy Yard – from the neon boxes on Novel at 2 Eye Street, SE, to the fluorescent strip running the length of Meridian at 1000 1<sup>st</sup> Street, SE to the oversized check-mark on the roof of the Kelvin at 1250 Half Street, SE are all embellishments that have appeared in recent months. This is all the more reason to insist upon a very precise lighting scheme in this design review as part of the Applicant’s presentation so that such unfortunate embellishments don’t simply happen after the fact.

The Applicant has stated that they will “restrict” neon lighting on the building, without providing any guarantee or confirmed final lighting scheme. Further, the ANC is uncomfortable with the Applicant’s “no neon lighting” verbal pledge as it may not in fact specifically prohibit some other lighting scheme or lighting material that may ultimately allow similarly objectionable design elements not presented within this package. We are left to wonder specifically *how* any such lighting will appear in a “restricted” way on the building, and whether there will in fact be neon-*ish* lighting, static or dynamic, LED or other material, somewhere else on the building. Clarity is absolutely vital.

As the Commission may recall, ANC 6D went through an extraordinarily thorough design review as part of The Wharf project and that included a full vetting of lighting design and placement prior to approval. Here, the Applicant belatedly provided two pages of bleak architectural drawings with precious little detail about their plans – let alone their intentions. Although ANC 6D has now reviewed the exhibits that were filed just two days before our ANC meeting, we request the Commission insist that the Applicant provide more definitive information so that there are no surprises in this regard. The Commission should also require a precise lighting scheme with proper renderings.

ANC 6D has reviewed the plans for placement of retail, building and tenant signage. There is no specific information about the size, placement and lighting of any retail signage nor how the Applicant intends to proclaim “5M” on the structure. ANC 6D believes that because 5M will be located on one of the most visible corners in the District of Columbia, at the entrance of the M st grand boulevard and within the line of sight of the Capitol Building, the Commission should engage in a very thorough exploration as part of this design review.

Further, ANC 6D believes that there must be a clear understanding about whether the Applicant intends to include placement of any digital signage as part of this project. Signage is most definitely part of the design review and, as such, ANC 6D wants to ensure that it does not impinge on the rest of the community, from the historic sanitary homes to the Capitol sightlines.

ANC 6D has met with the Applicant several times, each time reiterating our hope that they would make significant changes to the building's design to better reflect the importance of the site but also to announce to visitors that they are entering a residential neighborhood. Each time, the Applicant returned with microscopic changes purporting to have heard the ANC but indeed merely altering something by an inch here or a shade of grey there.

In closing, ANC 6D asked the Applicant to postpone their hearing before the Zoning Commission with the sincere belief that they might wish to continue work with us on the building's design and the impact it will have on the greater Southwest Community. The Applicant refused and has instead insisted on pushing forward with a design that has raised concerns not just among the commissioners but from neighbors across the ANC.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Phil Fisher".

Chair, ANC 6D  
Southwest, Navy Yard, & Buzzard Point