

March 10, 2022

D.C. Office of Zoning
441 – 4th Street SW, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20001

RE: OPPOSITION to Proposed PUD at 4618 – 14th Street NW, ZC Case No. 21-18

Dear Commissioners:

I am writing in opposition to the proposed PUD. I live one block from the subject address where DanceLoft Ventures LLC (“Developers”) want to up-zone the lot from MU3A to MU5A and build a large apartment building which will dwarf nearby homes and commercial businesses. I participated in many of the community meetings organized by the Developers and Commissioner Campbell, our ANC4C representative. Unfortunately, my hope that meaningful compromises would be made to reach agreement on a mixed-use building with many larger 2-3 bedroom affordable housing units was not realized. Notably, relevant topics relating to potential increases in street parking congestion, the potential worsening traffic conditions on the nearby east-west streets and the loss of six small businesses on the 4600 block were never covered or addressed responsibly in the community meetings.

Despite the many unknowns about the proposed PUD’s impacts on street parking congestion, street and alley safety, and the commercial business services on the 4600 block, I am opposing the project for the following reasons:

1. **THE PROPOSED BUILDING’S HEIGHT, SIZE, AND ARCHITECTURE ARE NOT IN HARMONY WITH ADJACENT COMMERCIAL AND RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS AND THE DESIGN VIOLATES SETBACK STANDARDS ON 14TH STREET NW.**

The renderings of the building show that it will tower in height from many directions over a large section of the neighborhood. Because the Developers have not submitted renderings showing how the building height will compare to the planned WMATA facility across the street, I cannot comment on that direction. A smaller apartment building has recently been built at 1521 Varnum St. NW and it rises above all the adjacent buildings and is an eyesore from the north, west, and east directions. The proposed building will be many feet taller and have greater incompatibility with the existing neighborhood. Oddly, the Developers tout the height and density of the proposed building as a public benefit. I disagree with this view because the height and density of the building increase the extent to which it will interfere with views of the neighborhood from adjacent buildings, access to natural light and breezes, and the privacy and quiet in adjacent residents and yards. During a community meeting, I requested that the Developers enclose the outside balconies on the sides of the building. Based on the submitted drawing in the case file, the Developers ignored my request.

The Developers tout the architecture as a public benefit because it reflects “superior urban design and architectures.” I respectfully disagree with this assessment. My expectation is that the design should harmonize with the adjacent commercial and residential buildings built in the 1920’s. The building being replaced is the Park Theater, which was built in 1924 and has art-deco features. Rather than sticking with the same exterior colors and materials used on the Park Theater to harmonize with

nearby buildings, the architect has selected commonly used-dark grey and dull red materials, nothing special in my opinion.

Finally, the bulky design on 14th Street side and absence of conformity with setbacks found on other recently constructed buildings on 14th Street NW is concerning to me as it may lead to more setback exemptions on nearby buildings and lead to an increasingly shadowed 14th Street NW.

2. THE DEVELOPERS SHOULD BE REQUIRED TO BUILD ALL THE PARKING SPACES REQUIRED UNDER DC REGULATIONS BECAUSE NODE 2 ALREADY SUFFERS FROM CONGESTED PARKING AS IT IS ONE MILE FROM THE METRO, HAS NO EAST-WEST BUS SERVICE, AND NO PUBLIC PARKING GARAGES.

Parking congestion has always been a problem on Node 2 streets because there are no public parking lots. A major unrealized assumption in the Small Area Plan was that the DSK Mariam Ethiopian Orthodox Church would build a new Sanctuary with an underground garage for 200-300 cars that would be available to the public when there were no church services. This never happened and members of this very popular church continue to cause substantial parking congestion on local streets on Sunday mornings and other holy days.

Additionally, customers of both DanceLoft and WMATA's Northern Bus Garage ("WMATA Garage"), the largest employer in the neighborhood, attract customers and business visitors who drive into the neighborhood and add to the street parking congestion. In the past, neither has provided parking on their private properties for their business customers and visitors. WMATA plans to redevelop the WMATA Garage and will not provide any public parking at the new facility because the WMATA Garage must be a "secured building." In response to neighborhood opposition to its decision to remain in the neighborhood, WMATA has agreed to dedicate retail space for one tenant, possibly a small grocery store, on the 14th Street side of its large complex. This project will likely be permitted by DCRA even though WMATA will not include any public parking for the future tenant's customers and will use 14th Street's parking lane as a loading dock for the tenant's usage. These plans will likely exacerbate existing street parking congestion and slow-down travel on 14th Street across from the subject PUD.

When reviewing this PUD project in light of the 2012 Small Area Plan, I respectfully ask that the Commissioners consider that the redevelopment goals in that plan were based on the unrealized assumption that WMATA would move the WMATA Garage out of Node 2 and Decatur Street, a dead-end street, would be reopened to east-west traffic. When developing the Small Area Plan, neighbors assumed that the polluted soil and underground water on the large acreage owned by WMATA would be cleaned up enough to permit construction of a large mixed-use community of residences and commercial businesses. This vision for Node 2 is **NOT** happening unfortunately. Consequently, the local street and parking infrastructure, with its current safety and congestion problems, will likely endure. Approving the proposed PUD without maximizing the number of parking spaces for residents and DanceLoft customers or requiring the Building Management to discourage car ownership by building residents using strong financial incentives (*e.g.*, monthly subsidies for WMATA Smarttrip cards, Capital-Bike-Share, Free-2-Move Car-share and Uber use) will have negative impacts on residents in the neighborhood, as well as on commercial customers and visitors.

3. LOCATING A LARGE APARTMENT BUILDING AT 4618 – 14TH STREET NW AND ATTRACTING NEW RETAILERS WHO SERVICE MANY CUSTOMERS THAT LIVE OUTSIDE THE NEARBY

NEIGHBORHOOD WILL EXACERBATE CURRENT TRAFFIC SAFETY PROBLEMS ON EAST-WEST STREETS AND MAKE VISION ZERO GOALS UNOBTAINABLE.

The east-west streets at Node 2 are narrow residential streets and neighbors have complained to DDOT for many years that more speed bumps and other traffic-calming measures are needed to slow-down and discourage east-west traffic. Several years ago, DDOT changed Emerson Street NW to a one-way street for several blocks to lower east-west traffic volumes. Crittenden Street NW, adjacent to the proposed building, is also one-way. Due to recent accidents at local east-west intersections, in November 2021, neighbors and Councilwoman George held a neighborhood walk-through with DDOT officials to determine if there were solutions to the safety problems. We are still awaiting a response from DDOT for these problems.

Additionally, Node 2 has no public transit service in the east-west direction and is one mile from nearby metro stations in Petworth and Columbia Heights. Although 14th street is a major artery in Ward 4, traffic is slow-moving due to heavy bus usage when the WMATA Garage is operational and the presence of north-south bike lanes that narrow driving lanes. Given our street infrastructure challenges and the presence of four elementary schools near Node 2, additions of high density developments like the proposed PUD should be reviewed very closely and in-depth by DDOT and the Commissioners. Otherwise, the Mayor's Vision Zero goal may not be realized.

- 4. THE DEVELOPERS CLAIMED PUBLIC BENEFITS FROM THE PROPOSED PUD ARE OVERBLOWN. EAST ROCK CREEK PARK, INCLUDING THE ADJACENT NEIGHBORHOOD, HAS ALREADY CREATED MANY AFFORDABLE HOUSING UNITS AND WILL LIKELY MEET THE MAYOR'S 2025 AFFORDABLE HOUSING GOALS WITHOUT THIS PUD WHICH WILL BE LOCATED NEXT TO A LARGE POLLUTING INDUSTRIAL SITE RATHER THAN IN A HEALTHIER NEIGHBORHOOD WHERE AFFORDABLE HOUSING IS DESPERATELY NEEDED.**

In addition to the claim that the great height and density of the building design is a public benefit, the Developers claim that the planned environmental and sustainable features of the new building will benefit the public. They fail to acknowledge that the existing building at 4618 – 14th Street already has solar panels. The Zoning Commission should discount the value of the asserted claim because it is not causally linked to approval of the PUD.¹

The Developers claim that the retention of DanceLoft in the neighborhood, in a larger footprint (DanceLoft will increase its square footage from 8,000 to over 11,000), is a public benefit because it is owned by a local woman and is a community performing arts space. Like the solar panel claim, the Developers fail to mention that six small business owners, some of whom have operated on the 4600 block longer than DanceLoft, will be forced to relocate if the PUD is approved. The owner of at least one of the small businesses is an Asian woman. ANC4C has not negotiated any conditions with the Developers to help keep these businesses in the nearby neighborhood. Consequently, this asserted public benefit claim should be rejected because neighbors will lose access to many local businesses that some of us depend on. Furthermore, according to the 2012 Small Area Plan, community performing arts

¹ Sarah Kaufman, "I could immediately imagine people dancing and leaping," WASH POST (Theater & Dance) (Aug. 12, 2016).

businesses like DanceLoft should be located in Node 3 near Kennedy Street rather than on the 4600 block.

The only real public benefit from the proposed PUD are the promised affordable housing units. I respectfully request that Commissioners limit the weight given to this public benefit for several reasons. This PUD is located directly across the street from an unhealthy industrial operation, namely WMATA's Garage which when operational, on a daily basis, houses diesel buses, a paint booth, and maintains buses using harmful industrial chemicals. As in the affordable housing neighborhoods located in SE near the freeway, the air quality in this neighborhood is not healthy and asthma and cancer rates have been high relative to other DC neighborhoods. Residents who need affordable housing should not be limited to living in unhealthy locations and city officials should encourage the location of affordable housing PUDs in healthier, less dense neighborhoods, such as those in Ward 3.

Given the good track record of Ward 4 and the nearby neighborhood in creating affordable housing units,² Commissioners should not presume that objecting neighbors are simply expressing NIMBY viewpoints and carefully consider the basis for neighbors' objections to this PUD. Finally, the local need for more affordable housing is in the category of larger 2-3 bedroom units, not studios or one-bedroom units. Consequently, I respectfully request that Commissioners only credit as a public benefit these larger units rented at 30-50% AMI that the Developers commit to create.

In sum, for the above reasons, I oppose the proposed PUD. Moreover, there is no evidence that the building at 4618 – 14th St NW will not eventually be redeveloped or renovated by someone else. When the building was for sale, multiple bidders submitted offers. DanceLoft, the second highest bidder, obtained the property only after the highest bidder's financing fell through.³ In the current real estate market, another owner or developer will likely be found for this building who may have more robust financial resources which can facilitate reaching a building design that nearby neighbors support.⁴

Sincerely,



Cecelia Waldeck
4517 – 15th Street NW

² Outside of SE and SW, since 2019, Rock Creek East (i.e., Ward 4) has added more affordable housing units than other DC neighborhoods and is very close to meeting its 2025 affordable housing goal set by Mayor Bowser. Dil, Bowser Seeks More Affordable Housing west of Rock Creek Park, AXIOS (12/17/21) at 1. Bowser, Housing Equity Report: Creating Goals for Areas of Our City (Oct. 2019) at 12. Additionally, since the 2016 zoning changes for R4 zoned neighborhoods, there have been many conversions of nearby row homes into two, three and even 7 residential units (i.e. 1521 Varnum St NW rowhome conversion). Many of the neighborhood's basement units are one-bedroom apartments with monthly rents comparable to the rental rates on DCHD's 2021 schedule for one-bedroom apartments at 50-60% AMI (i.e., \$1,160 - \$1,400). DC Department of Housing and Community Development, IZ Program 2021 Maximum Income, Rent and Purchase Price Schedule (6/25/21) at 3.

³ Conversation with Diana Movius (Feb. 28, 2022).

⁴ The Developers repeatedly rejected neighbors' design suggestions for financial reasons. Danceloft, which will apparently own and manage the new apartment building, had limited financial resources and depended on arts grants for 46% of its income in 2019. At the end of 2019, its total assets were valued at \$538,000. Moveius Contemporary Ballet Inc., IRS Form 990 (2019).