

Testimony of Tom Hier on behalf of Ward 3 Vision
Z.C. Case No. 11-07B – Further Processing of American University 2011-2020
Campus Plan for the Relocation and Construction of the
Washington College of Law at the Tenley Campus

Good evening, Chairman Hood and members of the Commission. My name is Tom Hier. By profession, I am a consultant in campus planning, working with universities across the country for the past 25 years. I will also state for the record that I have no professional connection to American University. I am here representing Ward 3 Vision.

What is Ward 3 Vision?

Ward 3 Vision is a grassroots organization that advocates for community development based on the principles of Smart Growth and Transit-Oriented Development. Our ultimate goal is to promote and enhance the development of dynamic, vibrant urban communities that are sustainable and engaging places to live, work and play. Our website is www.ward3vision.org.

With me is Ellen McCarthy, whom we have asked the Commission to accept as an expert in zoning, land use and campus plans. You have a brief description of her credentials, and I believe she has been accepted as an expert in those areas by both the Commission and the Board of Zoning Adjustment many times.

I would like to make four major points this evening:

First, we see the proposed location of the Washington College of Law on Tenley Circle as an important opportunity to improve the vitality of Wisconsin Avenue. In our 21st century knowledge-based economy, universities are prized for the economic activity they generate, as well as the intellectual stimulation and cache that they bring to the surrounding community. The addition of the Washington College of Law to Tenley Circle is consistent with our vision of Upper Northwest as becoming the “education corridor” of the city. As a result, we support the Tenley Campus Plan.

Second, Ward 3 Vision would like to acknowledge American University for having been extremely willing to meet, listen to our concerns and make adjustments in the proposed design and layout of the law school at the Tenley campus.

Third, while we generally support the Plan, we do see the opportunity to make the Wisconsin Avenue portion of the campus even better. This area, the green space in front of Capital Hall, should be a vibrant “front door” to the Washington College of Law and the Tenley Campus. It is unfortunate that, because of the designation of the historic district and the location of Capital Hall, it is not possible to put the main entrance to the law school right at apex where the property

meets Tenley Circle. However, the current plan, while providing an attractive green space, could be so much more.

The front of the current law school facility in Spring Valley shows the promise – we have observed during good weather that its small plaza is filled with students and others reading, hanging out, enjoying coffee or a meal. We can envision an even more interesting and active green space in front of Capital Hall -- perhaps with a fountain, sculpture and / or interactive art that makes interesting use of light and color, perhaps even a small performance space and / or a place for outdoor exhibits.

We also suggest that the connection between this green space and the plaza proposed at the main pedestrian entrance at Yuma be enhanced. This is the entrance closest to the Metro, and it should be inviting and clearly signify to campus visitors where the entrance is. It also should take advantage of the presence of the Yuma entrance to provide animation for the larger green space, perhaps a coffee cart on the plaza, with tables and chairs around the side of the lawn, perhaps chess tables like those in Dupont Circle, or other creative options for engaging users of the space – there are any number of possibilities. We have proposed to the University that it engage in an open design process, perhaps a charrette, to refine the current design and create a space that will serve both AU and the rest of the community, and are pleased that there appears to be a willingness on their part to do so.

Fourth and finally, Ward 3 Vision generally supports reducing the amount of parking in new developments in proximity to public transit, as part of an overall policy to reduce traffic and promote alternatives to the single-occupant auto. To that end, the DDOT report seems to us to have done a logical and thorough analysis of the parking situation. In addition to reducing the amount of parking provided, as suggested by DDOT, we urge the Commission to add the more specific conditions with regard to Transportation Demand Management suggested by DDOT. The DDOT conditions would provide for a range of alternative strategies that AU could employ, if demand exceeds the 250 parking spaces that DDOT proposes, which we think is unlikely.

As I know well from my practice, universities can be a huge plus for the cities and neighborhoods in which they are located. The proposed plan for the Tenley Campus will add 2,500 students, staff and faculty to an area that is currently lacking in street vitality. We urge the Zoning Commission to approve the further processing for the Tenley Campus. Thank you for your time.

Respectfully submitted,

Thomas C. Hier
Chair, Steering Committee
Ward 3 Vision