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TESTIMONY

Date: November 20, 2018
To: Historic Preservation Review Board
From: Dupont Circle Citizens Association
Re: Scottish Rite Temple, 1733 16th Street NW, HPA 18-668

Good morning. Thank you, Chair Heath and review board members for this opportunity to submit testimony.

I am Lance Salonia, Board Director of the Dupont Circle Citizens Association, and Chair of its Regulatory Committee.

The Dupont Circle Citizens Association is a registered non-profit civic association formed in 1922 to protect the interests of residents in Dupont Circle and across the District. Membership in the association is open to all who share its objectives, which include charitable and educational activities, working for civic improvements in the Dupont Circle neighborhood, and presenting the association's views to government.

Regular membership meetings are held on the first Monday most months, and decisions are taken by majority vote after a quorum is confirmed.

The Dupont Circle Citizens Association has been involved with this project since it was first brought to the neighbors' attention approximately one year ago this month. In that time, we have met with the Historic Preservation Office and with the developer, Perseus Development, in the hopes of seeing a project before us which would be acceptable to the neighbors and appropriate with regards to its compatibility with the historic district and the designated historic landmark, the Masonic Temple itself, on whose subdivided lot this development is proposed to be built. We don't believe any of these goals are being met with the proposal before you.

As you will have heard from other testimony by the neighbors, the neighbors are not happy with the proposal being presented to you. I don't need to expound on that.

With regards to its meeting the compatibility requirements of the preservation act, we understand that compatibility with the historic districts surrounding this development can mean compatibility with the neighboring rowhouses, or with the neighboring grand apartment houses, or with the Masonic Temple building itself, all of which have different appropriate heights, massing, and styles.

However, only compatibility with the Temple itself will ensure that the compatibility requirements of the historic preservation law be met with regards to compatibility with the individually landmarked Masonic Temple building upon whose property this development is proposed to be built.

We have been told that the current proposal is an attempt to emulate the styles of the surrounding row houses across S Street and across 15th Street from the project. The preponderance of rowhouses across the street on S Street are 2 stories with English basements. They have single level English basements. What is being proposed is a 4-story building with a 5th story penthouse and 2 levels of subterranean cellars below it -- hidden behind a 15-foot deep trench partly in the public space. The incongruence between the two sides of the street will be striking. The proposal will dominate the skyline in a way totally inappropriate for the row of rowhouses it's pretending to be and will be more than twice as tall as the real row of rowhouses across S Street on its north side and some of those on 15th Street. The façade of this building won't match that of the real rowhouses across the street. Because a 15-foot deep (and 10 foot wide) trench is being built to provide the required 'light and air' (and emergency egress) from the 2-levels-down subterranean habitable cellars in this building, a fence and hedges to hide the fence at the top of the trench will end up looking nothing like the English basements in the true rowhouses across S and 15th streets.

What we have being proposed here is a very large apartment building attempting to be disguised as a row of rowhouses. But it's a charade. It will no more look like rowhouses than a pig looks like a debutante after applying lipstick. Ever hear the expression 'It's like putting lipstick on a pig?' Because the developer is trying to squeeze out every permissible square foot for this project, what we have here is a too large apartment building pretending to be a row of rowhouses. Like Miss Piggy, it's bulging at the seams while doing so. The Dupont Circle Conservancy wants you to remove 2 floors. The staff at the Historic Preservation Office wants each of its floors to go on a diet so that it can fit into its 'rowhouse' disguise. The neighbors don't want it at all. Everyone knows there's something wrong here.

The elephant in the room, quite literally, is that we can't both achieve the historic district compatibility requirements AND give the developer every square inch of building space they are entitle to under the zoning regulations, by pretending this looks like a row of rowhouses. It doesn't. It doesn't look like a row of rowhouses, nor does it look like the grand, and large, apartment houses such as the Chastleton or the Somerset House both bookending the monumental Temple building. Nor does it look compatible with the monumental Temple itself. It is neither a small and 'charming' row of houses, nor a 'grand' and beautiful apartment building in the storied tradition of Dupont Circle. It is neither fish nor fowl, and it looks instead like something built by committee vs. by an architect with a vision. This is NOT what Dupont Circle and its architecture is known for. We don't want a structure bulging at the seams pretending to be something it is not. We want something that fits in with the neighborhood and more specifically, fits in with the space it's being built on.

But there is a solution. By building something compatible with the Temple building upon whose lot this development is proposed to be built, we can build something that is both compatible with the historic district (and the landmarked Temple building) AND allow the Masons to take full advantage of their right to develop a building as large as the zoning regs permit. By directing it be built as the building it is, and not forcing it to pretend to be a row of rowhouses which it is not, we can have an apartment building adjacent to the Mason Temple building which both compliments it and adds to the neighborhood's inventory of grand apartment houses in the tradition of Dupont Circle and its grand buildings including the Chastleton, the Somerset House, and most especially the House of the Temple at 1733 16th Street.

Please send this development back to the drawing board. We need a grand apartment building with a nice green lawn on this property. Something that will complement the landmarked Temple building and the surrounding historic district, not something that pretends to be something it's not.

Thank you, Chair Heath and board members for hearing me out.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lance P. Salonia". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "L" and a long, sweeping underline.

Lance Salonia
Regulatory Chair
Dupont Circle Citizens Association