

# Ward 3 Vision

**April 12, 2007**

**RE: 5220 Wisconsin Avenue, NW, Case No. 06-31**

Dear Members of the Commission:

My name is Tom Quinn and I am a five year homeowner and resident of Friendship Heights, and a founding member of Ward 3 Vision, a group of Ward 3 neighbors actively advocating for positive growth and environmentally responsible development in our area. Our group, comprised of several hundred residents, includes many who live within blocks of 5220 Wisconsin Avenue, including myself. I live at 5322 41<sup>st</sup> Street, just three blocks from the site. For years, I was perhaps the closest neighbor to the site, living at 5227 43<sup>rd</sup> Street just across Wisconsin Avenue.

I thank the Commission for the opportunity to testify in regard to this project. I would like to use the opportunity to tell you why Ward 3 Vision -- indeed, most of my neighbors -- support this project, in the hope that we can encourage you to support it as well.

We view the Akridge project as a benefit to our community for the following reasons:

- The project is just the type of transit-oriented development that our neighborhood needs to fulfill its potential as an attractive urban place, but also just the type of TOD that the region needs to combat sprawl, traffic, air pollution and related environmental problems;
- The developers have agreed to building according to principles that will garner LEED certification for the project;
- Significant amenities will accrue to the neighborhood from the project, including streetscape improvements and the removal of curb cuts and driveways on Wisconsin Avenue;
- The project will have a positive impact on economic development in our neighborhood and in Upper Northwest, and;
- The community will get several units of much-needed affordable housing.

We have spent a significant amount of time reviewing the project and our decision to support it comes from careful analysis and consideration of the benefits that it yields in each of the areas mentioned. I will take each in turn.

**Transit-Oriented Development**

Transit-oriented development (or TOD) is – simply put – the creation of compact, walkable communities centered around transit, making it possible to live a high quality life without complete dependence on a car for mobility and survival. By creating density around transportation hubs, TOD helps reduce traffic congestion by giving more people options to use public transportation, walk and bicycle for daily activities. This, in turn, minimizes sprawl, reduces pollution and protects our environment.

We believe that this proposal for 5220 Wisconsin Avenue is a fine example of transit-oriented development. It concentrates high quality housing within yards of the Friendship Heights Metro, provides ground floor retail that will create visual interest on the street and add vibrancy to the neighborhood, and as a mid-rise 7 story project, is of the right scale for this particular location.

### **LEED Certification**

The global warming crisis seems clear to most Americans and the move toward green and sustainable buildings is the socially responsible thing to do. The U.S. Green Building Council's LEED or "Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design" program is the prevailing rating system for establishing a standard of measurement for sustainable buildings. Akridge has committed to achieving LEED certification for this project and we applaud their efforts to do so. We understand that this would be the first LEED certified residential building in the District.

For certification, the project will be judged in the following LEED categories: Sustainable Sites, Water Efficiency, Energy and Atmosphere, Materials and Resources, Indoor Environmental Quality, and Innovation and Design Process. Projects earn points by performing degrees better than existing codes and standards in all categories. In practical terms, this means:

- Significant energy savings for heat and electricity – saving the occupants money, on average a certified building is 25-30 percent more energy efficient, and has lower electricity peak consumption;
- Significant reduction in water consumption (and therefore waste water treatment than traditional buildings) – helps reduce burden on municipal infrastructure;
- Reduced construction & operations waste products – reduces landfill costs and increases recycling of construction materials;
- Improved indoor environmental (air & light) quality to conventional buildings;
- Lower operations & maintenance costs for running the building - resulting in lower condo fees and/or rents than market averages;
- Decreased health/medical complications for tenants.

The carbon footprint of the occupants of this building will be minimized through these environmentally-beneficial features and the building's transit location. The pedestrian-oriented design of the building and sidewalk, spaces for car-sharing and promotion of bicycling through providing bicycle parking for residents and employees along with

employee showers and changing rooms further reduces vehicle trips and pollution associated with car use for this site.

Beyond the obvious benefits of green building and LEED certification, the very idea of a transit-oriented development is critical here. Environmental organizations and city planners understand that the most sustainable approach to urban development, the best way to reduce traffic is to build more, rather than less, at Metro. This site, directly on top of the Metro, is the perfect location for TOD, which is the right way to build, and we support it in spite of its modest density and height.

### **Benefits to the Neighborhood**

As a resident of this neighborhood, I can tell you that the paucity of neighborhood-serving retail offerings on the Tenley - Friendship Heights corridor is bewildering for a community with our economic capacity. Basic services that make a community – places to hang out for coffee, variety in restaurants and bakeries to grab an interesting meal or a non-industrial baked good – let alone more unusual offerings that provide entertainment options – movie theatres, neighborhood playhouses, bowling alleys, etc. –are few and far between in our neighborhood. One project will not change the face of the neighborhood, but a well-designed project that pays careful attention to the first floor retail it brings can start to turn the tide.

Akridge is just such a project. Frustrated with the unwillingness of opponents to the project or the ANC to participate in constructive negotiations, Ward 3 Vision engaged in discussions with Akridge over a period of several months to ensure that first floor retail will be a positive amenity for our neighborhood. Understanding that many neighbors would like to see a streetscape with local-serving retail shops, we have obtained commitments from Akridge for a minimum of three distinct spaces which will ensure that retail spaces are an appropriate size for smaller, neighborhood-serving, shops – perhaps locally owned “Mom and Pops.” Additionally, the developer has agreed that each retail space will have its primary entrances on the Wisconsin Avenue sidewalk and has committed to a design that includes significant amounts of glass facing the main street to ensure that the retail space contributes to a pedestrian-oriented, walkable, vital streetscape. Akridge has also agreed to limit the amount of space that can be leased to banks and other office uses like insurance companies or tax preparers, which should lead to more interesting and lively uses. And, of course, they intend to upgrade the area in front of the adjacent PEPCO substation with a community display space to help soften that stretch of urban streetscape that currently serves as yet another “blank wall” along our main street.

Our discussions to date have been productive, and we plan to continue to work with the developer to tailor their retail marketing efforts to the neighborhood’s needs as the project evolves.

These may seem like nuances, but they are not. These issues are critical to a successful mixed-use street. Further, it is worth noting that none of the retail proposed would be

allowed under matter-of-right zoning, and that very few of the qualitative restrictions would apply were it not for the PUD process. Under matter-of-right zoning, this block, which sits on top of a Metro stop, would be required to have residential uses or blank walls on the sidewalk frontage. This is the death-knell for an urban street. Matter-of-right zoning does not offer us a vision for a neighborhood or a roadmap for how to achieve quality development here or anywhere else. It only offers arbitrary and often meaningless restrictions on quantity. We have found that the PUD process allows the community to examine a project in detail and participate in the qualitative decisions that have a real and lasting impact on neighborhood life.

Finally on this point of retail, we believe that it is critical for this project and every other major development along Wisconsin Avenue to incorporate ground floor retail. In our neighborhoods in Upper Northwest, Wisconsin and Connecticut Avenues serve not only as our main streets, they are also our *only* public streets – that is, the only streets that are not predominantly residential. It is a curiosity that Washington, DC has evolved so differently from other major urban areas in that our commerce is concentrated on only a few major streets throughout the city – Wisconsin, Connecticut, Georgia/7<sup>th</sup>, Pennsylvania Avenue, 14th Street, H Street, P Street etc. If we wish to preserve our residential neighborhoods – and I believe that is a view that we all share – and yet still have a vital city, we must allow our major Main Streets to become truly great streets, to provide the commerce that is so vital to urban living.

### **Economic Development**

We know that Councilmember Kwame Brown stated in a recent letter to the Commission that “Friendship Heights doesn’t need more economic stimulus.” Frankly, we are astonished by such a statement, as nothing could be further from the truth in the case of Friendship Heights. I have already noted the paucity of neighborhood serving retail spaces and the lack of even the most basic amenities that turn a grid of streets into a community.

One of the most illuminating anecdotes related to economic development in this area is the following text from a sign placed on the Left Bank Bakery Café when it closed its doors after trying to make a go of it in the new Tenley Hill building on Wisconsin at Davenport St., NW:

“The decision to close was driven by a number of factors. The development of this part of Wisconsin Avenue has proceeded much more slowly than anticipated when we began the business, less density, fewer customers...”

That is the reality of retail economics. Of course, the fantasy is that you can build retail space in matter of right or even lower density structures, but a lively streetscape requires a critical mass of pedestrian traffic on the sidewalk. As for “economic stimulus” – we have no idea what Councilmember Brown is referring to; we are not talking about giving anything away, we are merely saying that building the right kind of development will

result in an improved economic reality for retail, the city and the neighborhood. This is one of those win-win situations.

Just as importantly on the economic development front, the District is competing with the suburbs for financially secure seniors and childless couples, a very attractive demographic. We need to provide them attractive in-city housing choices. For residents who are looking for the convenience of urban condo living, there are few options to live in mature Upper Northwest neighborhoods. Instead, other jurisdictions with fewer barriers to developing multi-family buildings in attractive areas near Metro win out. Friendship Heights and other key locations with transit nodes are the perfect places to serve these kinds of residents. Keeping or attracting this population to the District is critical to increasing the tax base, helping the schools, and supporting a broader array of locally-oriented businesses. Multi-family housing options on Wisconsin Avenue like the Akridge project will also help preserve nearby single family homes for larger families that desire more space for children.

### **Affordable Housing**

It is no secret that Washington is an exceedingly expensive place to live. Even families with two decent incomes find it difficult to afford housing in our neighborhoods. But if we are to retain richness and diversity in Upper Northwest, we must have more options for affordable housing. This proposal is one incremental but critical step to create affordable housing in our neighborhood. Akridge will include 6 to 7 units that will be permanently set aside as affordable. This is a substantial contribution from a privately developed building, and it is desperately needed in this neighborhood. Akridge further intends to support the Lisner Home, located a few blocks away, with 4 additional units of housing for extremely low income seniors. These are significant contributions to the community.

### **Closing Remarks**

In closing, I would like to state the world has changed in Ward 3. Neighbors who may have sat on the sidelines in the past are tired and frustrated by the lack of progress in Ward 3. We are no longer willing to let a vocal minority dominate the discussion about what type of growth and development is acceptable in our neighborhoods. Our last election served as tangible proof that our views are shared by a solid majority of residents. Mary Cheh ran on a platform that supported transit-oriented development, more affordable housing, and good redevelopment along Wisconsin Avenue and specifically endorsed this project. Mary Cheh won every precinct in a crowded primary of nine candidates, overall winning more votes than the next four candidates combined. Cheh handily won the general election with 72 percent of the vote. The voters of Ward 3 overwhelmingly supported our new Councilmember Mary Cheh, who embraced smart growth. Indeed, the opponents of smart growth and many of those who also oppose the Akridge project made the election a referendum on smart growth. The results are in -- our neighborhoods want well-designed transit-oriented development, like this project.

We are average citizens in Ward 3 – old and young, natives and transplants, workers and retirees, singles, couples and families, and everything in between. And we believe in this project. 5220 is good for the neighborhood and good for the city. Neighborhood residents greatly value the amenities and benefits package put forth by Akridge, and we sincerely hope that this PUD is accepted as a whole in order to send a strong positive message about what kind of development is supported and encouraged in this major corridor.

Sincerely,

Tom Quinn  
5322 41<sup>st</sup> Street, NW  
Washington, D.C.