

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City



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July 13, 2012

Mr. Terry Bellamy, Director

DC Department of Transportation

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Washington, DC 20003

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Dear Director Bellamy,

I am writing on behalf of The Committee of 100 on the Federal City regarding DDOT's decision to proceed with a design/build proposal for a large industrial streetcar maintenance facility on the Spingarn/Phelps campus on Benning Road, NE.

Location of this industrial 15,000sf car barn -- with its numerous exposed train tracks outside the building and abundant overhead wires (not shown in the drawings) -- is not appropriate or welcomed by residents of the area for many reasons:

A. **Industrial use is incompatible with The Comprehensive Plan.** This facility is in direct conflict with the Land Use Element of the Comprehensive Plan regarding municipal public works functions:

LU-3.1.8 Co-Location of Municipal Public Works Functions

Improve the performance of existing industrial areas through zoning regulations and city policies which encourage the more efficient use of land, including the co-location of municipal functions (such as fleet maintenance, record storage, and warehousing) on consolidated sites rather than independently managed scattered sites.

Further, the Comprehensive Plan establishes a vision of the neighborhood that does not include a major industrial facility:

UNE-2.2.4 Langston and Carver Terrace

Sustain the Langston Terrace and Carver Terrace developments as essential housing resources for lower income families. Important historic elements of Langston Terrace should be protected and restored.

UNE-2.2.5 Schools on the Hill Campus

Improve the integration of the Schools on the Hill Campus (Spingarn, Brown, and Young Schools) with the adjacent Carver/Langston neighborhood.

Action UNE -2.2.A Schools on the Hill Campus Planning

Undertake a planning process to enhance the physical environment of the Schools on the Hill Campus, enabling the campus to function more effectively as a neighborhood resource, a gateway from the neighborhoods of Upper Northeast to the Anacostia River parklands, and an educational complex ("city of learning") that benefits residents of all ages.

B. Industrial use is incompatible with area zoning and adjacent open space. The proposed streetcar barn also conflicts with the R-5-B residential zoning of the area and with the adjacent C-2-B commercial area:

***R-5-B** - Permits matter-of-right moderate development of general residential uses, including single-family dwellings, flats, and apartment buildings, to a maximum lot occupancy of 60% (20% for public recreation and community centers), a maximum FAR of 1.8, and a maximum height of fifty (50) feet (90 feet for schools and 45 feet for public recreation and community centers). Rear yard requirements are not less than fifteen (15) feet.*

C-2-B

Permits matter-of-right medium density development, including office, retail, housing, and mixed uses to a maximum lot occupancy of 80% for residential use and 100% for all other uses, a maximum FAR of 3.5 for residential use and 1.5 FAR for other permitted uses, and a maximum height of sixty-five (65) feet. Rear yard requirements are fifteen (15) feet; one family detached dwellings and one family semi-detached dwellings side yard requirements are eight (8) feet.

In addition, the proposed industrial complex adjacent to the NPS-operated Langston Golf Course seriously diminishes the setting of this beautiful and quiet open space.

C. The Spingarn campus is eligible for listing on the inventory of Historic Places as part of the Multiple Property Designation for Historic Schools. Eligibility is based in part on its design (the last Colonial Revival school built in DC), it's association (the first African American High School built at that time in 35 years), and its setting as a unique campus.

D. The haste of the design process and the necessity of constructing cheaply is highly unlikely to produce a structure that will compliment the setting or continue the 100-year old tradition of building car barns as significant public structures as assets to the neighborhood (such as the Car Barn at East Capitol and 15th St., NE).

Questions to Address: DDOT has signed a design/build contract with a private firm to expedite construction at this inappropriate location. In light of the forgoing factors that make this site unsuitable for location of the car barn, the public needs a better understanding of what led you to choose this site and why you believe it is legal to appropriate it for industrial use.

- 1. Does the City intend to amend the Comprehensive Plan and seek spot zoning in order to build this incompatible facility? If so, how do you propose to engage the public in this process?***
- 2. What sites other than Spingarn and the site on the western end of Union Station did you consider? Did you consider any sites on land zoned for industrial development as required in the Land Use Element of***

the Comprehensive Plan? For what reasons (other than that it is public property and therefore easier to obtain) did you select the Spingarn site over other sites?

3. How does DDOT propose to conduct appropriate studies of historic and cultural resources prior to initiating work at the site? Your agency has stated that it will review all of the historic resources affected by the streetcar. When will this review take place? How will the community be involved in the review process? It is our understanding that the Section 9(b) review under the DC Historic Landmark and Preservation Act (DC Laws 20144) by the Historic Preservation Office and the staff of the Commission on Fine Arts resulted in negative comments about the use of the Spingarn site, with recommendations that alternative sites be considered. But because the Section 9(b) review process is not public and not binding, the public has not had an opportunity to comment on historic and cultural issues.

4. How will DDOT involve the public in design review if the design and construction phases overlap as called for in the contract? What steps will you take to design this industrial facility so as to honor the residential character of the area and the historic nature of this site? Car barns (streetcar maintenance facilities) that were built over 100 years ago in this city are today contributing structures to neighborhoods because they were built to very high standards, surviving to this day as significant historic assets. To continue that legacy, we urge DDOT to involve area residents and civic groups, the Office of Historic Preservation and the Commission of Fine Arts in design guidance and review.

5. Have you examined the deed for this land when it was transferred from the Federal Government to the Board of Education as a school facility? Were there any conditions in this deed that precluded use of a portion of the property for an industrial facility or posed any other obstacles to its use for other primary purposes?

6. How will DDOT avoid making similar ad hoc site decisions on maintenance facilities in the future? When will the agency initiate a maintenance facility master plan so that well in advance you will have identified appropriate sites and evaluated designs of architectural distinction that also meet the needs of the streetcar system?

On April 25, 2012, representing the Committee of 100, I testified on your agency's 2013 budget request:

DOT's decision to locate a large-scale industrial facility on the beautiful Spingarn academic campus, immediately adjacent to the Langston Golf Course, appears to be driven almost entirely by the fact that the property is city-owned. Creating an industrial complex here does not meet basic principles of land use compatibility.

DDOT's rendering of the proposed building and yards raises another red flag. The design and construction schedules are extremely tight, and driven by a fixed deadline to be in operation in one year. What design review is possible under these conditions? What community process can reasonably occur to mitigate the maintenance barn's adverse impacts? These conditions do not bode well for great architecture.

Answers to all of these questions – the six posed above and those posed in our testimony -- are particularly important in light of the City's plans to seek financing outside the City budget for development of a 22-mile streetcar system.

The intrusion of an industrial complex on the Spingarn campus, a landmark-eligible property, will destroy the integrity of the property and send a message to the students and community that DDOT values expediency above all else. DDOT appears to be ignoring both zoning restrictions on industrial uses and community desires in order to overcome the lack of support facility master planning that has surrounded the development of a promising streetcar system.

We look forward to your response. Please send correspondence to Meg Maguire, Chair, Transportation Subcommittee, The Committee of 100 on the Federal City, 945 G St., NW, Washington, DC 20001. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely yours,

Meg Maguire, Chair, Transportation Subcommittee

Cc.

- Mayor Vincent Gray
- Council Chair Phil Mendelson; Councilmembers Mary Cheh, Kenyan McDuffie, Yvette Alexander, Tommy Wells
- DC Attorney General
- DC Zoning Commission
- Ward 5 ANC Commissioners
- DC SHPO
- Commission on Fine Arts
- National Capital Parks and Planning
- DC School Board
- Capitol Hill Restoration Society
- DC Preservation League
- 21st Century School Fund

- Doug Wheeler, Hogan Lovells