

THE NORTHWEST CURRENT

Akridge project gains panel's nod

■ **Zoning:** Builder would put seven stories at Friendship site

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The D.C. Zoning Commission on Monday gave initial approval to a hotly contested development proposal at 5220 Wisconsin Ave., dismissing all of the local advisory neighborhood commission's arguments against the project.

In a unanimous decision, the Zoning Commission supported a proposal from Akridge Real Estate Services to build a seven-story condominium building with ground-floor retail on the old Chevy Chase

Buick dealership site adjacent to the Friendship Heights Metro stop. The commission must still take a final vote, which has not been scheduled.

Just before the vote, Zoning Commission chair Carol Mitten paraphrased the neighborhood commission's opposition to the project and dismantled it point by point.

"I just don't find that the statements by the ANC adequately or accurately describe the situation that will exist there," Mitten said.

The Friendship Heights, Tenleytown and American University neighborhood commission had argued that at 79 feet tall, the 60- to 70-unit building would dwarf surrounding homes and set a See **Akridge**/Page 11



Courtesy of Akridge

Akridge plans to replace a car dealership with a mixed-use residential and retail building.

AKRIDGE

From Page 1

precedent for more large-scale development. Neighborhood commissioners also said the proposal's density is inappropriate in a residential neighborhood.

But Mitten and her fellow commissioners were unconvinced. They said the project's height and density fit in along the largely commercial stretch of Wisconsin Avenue that is filled with department stores and luxury shopping destinations — especially because the neighborhood is likely to grow denser.

"I just don't think we should be bound by what's on the ground today," said Mitten.

Commissioner John Parsons added, "There's no choice. We must consider what the future brings us."

Speaking more generally, commissioner Gregory Jeffries said since the entire city is likely to grow, he doesn't believe "any one area should be exempt."

Mitten also dismissed critics' arguments that the building is unacceptable because it will cover the entire lot and exclude any green space. She pointed out that the neighborhood commission had said it would support a zoning change one step below the change Akridge is seeking. And in fact, Mitten said, in that zoning category, a building with entirely retail on the first floor could occupy its full lot.

Zoning Commission members also addressed the neighborhood commission's arguments that the area could not handle the additional traffic Akridge's project would bring. They said they depend on the D.C. Department of Transportation for analysis on the additional traffic a new development might spur. Since the Transportation Department supported the project, the Zoning Commissioners said they were satisfied that the impact would be relatively minimal.

Neighborhood commissioners

also said the alley behind the proposed building, which will be used for access to an underground garage and loading dock, will become a traffic tangle because it is shared by nearby residents.

Mitten said drivers can work around each other. "It's not bumper cars in the alley."

And Jeffries added: "There's just certain things that come with living in the urban context."

Anthony Hood was the only zoning commissioner to express doubts about the project. He said: "When I got off the Metro at Columbia Heights the other day, I had to step back, and I didn't like it." Hood said the scale of the new development there overwhelmed him.

Hood said he would feel better if he could be confident Akridge would not give him the same view of a looming tower as he exited the Friendship Heights Metro station.

Mitten said the commission would reopen the record to allow Akridge to add a model, drawing or simulation that shows what the building will look like within the context of the area.

She also tackled what she perceived to be "score keeping" on the part of proponents and opponents. Mitten said it seemed each side was trying to flood the record with letters and petitions in hopes that the commission would agree with whichever side sent the most paper.

Mitten said that though she does not want people to think their opinions do not matter, letters do not carry the same weight as testimony.

"It's not always clear that each individual who submits a letter to the record is aware of all the details that are involved," she said. "I don't want people to think it's a scoring game."

In a statement yesterday, advisory neighborhood commissioner Carolyn Sherman said the Zoning Commission erred by dismissing the substantial opposition.

"The legitimate issues raised in letters and testimony by the many

hundreds of opponents of the Akridge project, including two members of the City Council, barely surfaced in their discussion and were immediately dismissed as trivial. The Commissioners had obviously conducted only a perfunctory reading of the submissions that addressed concerns about the project," she wrote.

Commenting on the decision, Sherman wrote: "The Zoning Commission missed an opportunity to reach a compromise that would have been a win for the developers and the neighborhood. We love the neighborhood and we're going to

continue to fight to protect it. This was one skirmish."

Sherman said the decision will set an unwelcome precedent and shows the "city's leadership is intent on furthering the interests of developers at the cost of protecting neighborhoods and their citizens."

The neighborhood commission was not alone in its opposition to the project. Critics included a coalition that included the Friendship Neighborhood Association.

But commissioners did not specifically address opposing arguments aside from those presented by the neighborhood commission.

Commissioners did mention testimony by some of the supporters, which had included Ward 3 Council member Mary Cheh and the smart-growth advocacy group Ward 3 Vision. Without identifying the specific source, both Mitten and Jeffries said they found Chevy Chase neighborhood commissioner Jim McCarthy's testimony in favor of the development compelling. McCarthy had said many buildings along Connecticut Avenue in Chevy Chase are above seven stories and they do not hurt his quality of life.

Akridge representatives could not be reached for comment.