

"GU boathouse ought to shift downriver"

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I would like to amplify on The Current's July 6 Viewpoint, "Georgetown Boathouse Doesn't Hold Water," by Ernie Brooks. Alan Brangman, the in-house architect for Georgetown University (GU), testified on June 22 before the DC Council's Committee on Public Works and the Environment that GU, if necessary, could build its boathouse on its upriver property. Mr. Brangman's claim is untenable.

On January 12, 2005, I participated in a site visit led by Ernie Brooks to the waterfront area including the upriver property owned by GU. GU's parcel, which the University would like to exchange with the National Park Service (NPS) for parkland near Key Bridge, is located about a mile upriver from Key Bridge. This property, which lies about 15 feet below the Capital Crescent Trail (CCT) and runs parallel to it, is a narrow rectangular strip of bottomland approximately 1070 feet by 45 feet, of which only one third actually has river frontage.

Because of the 15-foot steep cliff, there is a protective fence for the safety of users of the Trail. The University also has a 15-foot wide easement along the CCT to its upriver parcel over which there has been superimposed a 10-foot wide paved surface for bicycle and pedestrian use. To connect GU's strip of land with the easement, the University would have to build a driveway down the 15-foot precipice to the property.

Our inspection of GU's upriver land confirmed that this parcel, because of its topography and marginal access, is unbuildable. The site inspection also revealed that there was insufficient room for a turnabout for emergency vehicles as well as boat trailers which are designed to transport 8-oar shells that are 60 feet long. The 15-foot width of the easement makes access marginal. Obviously, there are many places along this easement where vehicles could not pass each other in opposite directions.

Even GU concedes that its upriver parcel is unusable for the construction of a collegiate boathouse. An official of the University who participated in our site visit in January told us that when GU acquired this property, the University actually considered locating its boathouse at this site. He further explained that the University's architect made some sketches of a possible boathouse at this location and explored running power and utility lines under the easement. GU concluded that this site for a boathouse wouldn't work and gave up the project. Moreover, in 1999, an NPS-selected appraiser concluded that this tract was unbuildable because of its topography and marginal access.

As a site for a boathouse, the upriver parcel is of no value to GU. For that reason, the public will get nothing from this so-called land exchange. Based on these facts it is disingenuous for officials of NPS and GU to assert that if this proposed land exchange is not consummated, GU will build its boathouse on its upriver land. Thus, NPS and GU should seek another site. But where?

For land use planning purposes, the Park Service should treat the entire waterfront from Washington Harbor to the site currently earmarked for GU's boathouse as one integrated area for planning purposes. This would avoid piecemeal and ad hoc planning. Presently, the non-motorized boathouse zone extends from 34th and Water Sts. to a point within the C&O Canal National Historical Park variously described by NPS as somewhere between 1,000-1,250 ft. upriver from Key Bridge. This ambiguity as to the location of the upriver boundary is because, as the representative of the Park Service so cavalierly stated on June 22, there is no "hard line in the woods," but just a "general guideline." George Washington University (GW) has a claim for its boathouse on the first parcel upstream from 34th and Water Sts.

The ideal place for GU's boathouse would be immediately downriver from GW's assigned parcel. GW and GU could even share a roadway into their boathouses at 34th and Water Sts. Since the Georgetown Waterfront Park is still in the planning stage, and no actual work has started, GU's boathouse would fit perfectly at this location if well designed and appropriately reduced in size. It would be an attractive addition to what is in reality an urban park. This solution could be accomplished by either a long-term lease agreement or a land exchange between NPS and GU. This arrangement would also enable NPS to impose appropriate restrictions for the benefit of the public on the size and shape of this boathouse.

This arrangement is a "win-win" solution for everyone: GU secures its boathouse on the waterfront; the public's interest in the preservation and protection of the C&O Canal National Historical Park and the Capital Crescent Trail is secured; and NPS obtains GU's upriver parcel and the easement for incorporation into the C&O Canal National Historical Park.

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