

Testimony – Council of the District of Columbia, The Committee on Public Oversight Roundtable on the Quality of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers and the Chesapeake Bay and **the Proposed Construction of a new Georgetown University Boathouse**, Wednesday, June 22, 2005, 1 PM, Room 500, Wilson Building, 1350 Pennsylvania Ave.

I. INTRODUCTION:

My name is Sally Strain, a resident of the District of Columbia since 1963. The neighborhood where I live, Palisades (ANC3D), borders on the Capital Crescent Trail (CCT), the Canal Towpath and the Potomac River, at the western edge of the three and one-half mile DC-section of the C&O Canal National Historical Park (Park) and the Potomac Gorge.

Today, I am here to speak in opposition to the Georgetown University (GU) boathouse proposal on behalf of Defenders of Potomac River Parkland (Defenders),* an alliance of 14 major environmental, recreational and civic organizations formed in April 2003. The alliance includes residents of Georgetown, Foxhall Village and Palisades, the three communities that border the Park.

The Defenders are dedicated to the protection and preservation of the undeveloped shoreline and Open Space in the Park between Key Bridge and Chain Bridge. We believe that scenic, national, historical parkland belongs to everyone and should not be taken out of the public domain and diverted to private development interests.

We are opposed to the planned transfer of a section of the Park to GU, and believe that the boathouse proposal is not in the public interest. **For the following reasons, the National Park Service (NPS) should require a programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Georgetown waterfront, to identify alternative locations, sizes and uses for three boathouses proposed for the area (two enormous collegiate facilities and one public boathouse), instead of proceeding in a piecemeal manner:**

II. REASONS TO OPPOSE THE GU BOATHOUSE PROPOSAL:

1. The location and size are wrong:

The proposal calls for private development of an enormous structure at the Gateway to the Park, one of the most scenic treasures in the nation's capital. The boathouse site consists of a long, narrow section of floodplain, situated between the Potomac River and the CCT, a busy hiker/biker and commuter trail. The boathouse would be the length of a football field and rise above the level of the Towpath. It would be constructed 7-15 feet from the river's edge on top of an 84-inch diameter corroding sewer line, and close to the fragile historic Canal bank. To access the site, a new road would be built parallel to the CCT for construction, servicing and maintenance of the boathouse, as well as for moving boats in and out of the constricted area on 60-70 foot trailers. A 75-foot private dock would extend out into the River, blocking shoreline boaters. *How is the public being served?*

2. The valuation of property is wrong:

The US government/NPS would provide GU with an incredibly valuable section of land with very little in return – a gross misuse of public resources.

The Gateway site would be swapped for GU-held bottomland upstream. According to documents released to the Defenders under the Freedom of Information Act, the irregularly shaped bottomland is “unbuildable.” Therefore, the land swap appears to be unequal in value. *How is the public being served?*

3. The exclusive private use is wrong:

Despite its enormous size and location in a national historical park, the GU boathouse would not accommodate high school and other public boating programs, unlike the Thompson Boat Center in Georgetown, which has shared space with public and private boating groups for many years. Lack of easy access to the proposed GU boathouse site would limit the use of the boathouse to a small number of university students, as per ruling of the DC Zoning Commission, and, therefore, the McMansion-type facility would be sadly underused. *How is the public being served?*

4. The potential adverse impacts are significant:

The potential direct, indirect and cumulative impacts from the GU boathouse proposal, together with two other boathouses proposed for the area, are significant:

Safety issues have not been addressed, despite the proximity of the proposed building to the CCT, the Towpath and the River. The viewshed of the historic setting would be changed forever. Damage from construction to two historic structures (and to an underground, corroding 84-inch sewer line) could lead to devastating environmental and financial consequences. Increased flood damage to historic structures could be anticipated due to the removal of vegetation at the proposed boathouse site. Changes in the river flow from the construction of a 75-foot long private dock would add to the problem. *How is the public being served?*

5. The loss of opportunity to the City and Region is great:

The enormous facility would exclude high school programs and the general public, although those groups would be allowed to walk around the perimeter of the building, look at the impressive walls, and gaze out at the river. *How is the public being served?*

6. The Whitehurst Freeway Deconstruction Feasibility Study is underway:

The ongoing Feasibility study includes the non-motorized boathouse zone in its “study area.” In addition, GU has pending a proposal to widen Canal Rd. as it links up to Whitehurst Freeway, in conjunction with a new campus entrance. Until any change to

the Whitehurst Freeway is resolved – hopefully by means of an EIS of the waterfront -- it is premature to consider construction of any new boathouses in Georgetown.

7. Other reasons to oppose the GU boathouse proposal – a flawed review process:

- The original boathouse plan for a 4,000 sq. ft. public facility in the Park has been flawed from the beginning. After almost 20 years, with almost no public scrutiny, the boathouse concept has changed from a small, *public* facility to a huge *private* 20,000 sq ft "boathouse" that overpowers the narrow, fragile, crowded and historic setting.

Circumstances along the popular trail routes have changed enormously in two decades, with ever increasing popularity of the public recreational corridor. Thousands of residents of the area and visitors to the city use the trails every year.

- ANC3D, which borders two-thirds of the DC-section of the Park, has never been consulted about the proposal, despite the fact that three ANC3D Commissioners have the historic park within their single member district boundaries. Since 2003, ANC3D has urged NPS to do an EIS on the GU boathouse proposal. In addition, ANC3D has asked NPS for consulting party status in a historic review Section 106 process. NPS has not responded affirmatively to either of the requests.

Even advisory groups have been misled by this proposal, as is clear from the expression of dismay contained in the attached letter of May 11, 2004 from the Chairman of the C&O Canal National Historical Park Advisory Commission to the DC Zoning Commission. The very organization (NPS) that should be protecting the Park appears to be not fulfilling its responsibility.

The proposal is a bad deal for the public and for the Park. If approved, everyone would lose except Georgetown University. With the increase in population in this metropolitan region, NPS should be working to *increase* parks in urban settings, instead of bowing to private interests.

III. A BETTER BOATHOUSE PLAN IS POSSIBLE!

We can have boathouses in safe, accessible locations while protecting the Park for the enjoyment of everyone. A programmatic Environmental Impact Statement provides the means to achieve that goal. A boathouse outside the Park, at a more accessible location, would add a vibrant point of interest to the waterfront, truly animate the river, preserve Open Space, protect the C&O Canal National Historical Park, add to the enjoyment of all boating communities and make good use of limited financial and natural resources available to the city.

One of many alternative plans worth considering with environmental, technical and practical advantages over the current non-motorized boathouse plan, would be to build a Georgetown "Universal" Boathouse outside the Park (see attached architectural rendering). Instead of constructing three separate boathouses – two imposing private collegiate facilities and one public boathouse as proposed by NPS for the three-block

boathouse zone – build only one public-private facility, between 34th St. and Key Bridge, and open it to university, high school and public boating programs, like Thompson’s Boat Center at the downstream edge of

Georgetown. Other creative 21st Century solutions that will both protect the Park and provide boating opportunities for everyone deserve consideration.

The end result would be magnificent: The universities would help their athletic programs while reaching out to the community; NPS would develop the waterfront while protecting the C&O Canal National Historical Park, and everyone – including the general public and high school boating programs -- would benefit from the new facility, not just one collegiate recreational group.

IV. RECOMMENDATION:

The Defenders request the Council to consider directing NPS to:

1. Conduct a programmatic EIS of the Georgetown waterfront, including the non-motorized boathouse zone, to ensure that preservation of environmental, historical, and public resources are addressed in the planning of three new boathouses, and that alternative sites, sizes and uses for the facilities are considered.
2. Protect and preserve the Park for public use, not develop it for private facilities.
3. Build private boathouses outside the Park.

We urge the Council to visit the three and one-half mile DC-section of the Park, walk along the Towpath upstream from Georgetown, bicycle along the Capital Crescent Trail, or paddle to Georgetown from Fletcher’s Boathouse, hugging the shoreline as you approach the city. Surely you will agree that every inch of the C&O Canal National Historical Park in Washington, DC is worth protecting from private development, for today and for future generations of residents and visitors to the Nation’s Capital.

Thank you.

* Members of Defenders of Potomac River Parkland www.savethecanal.org are:

American Canoe Association, American Whitewater Association, Audubon Naturalist Society, Canoe Cruisers Association, C&O Canal Association, Citizens Committee to Save Laurel Lakes, Coalition for the Capital Crescent Trail, Friends of the Earth, League of Women Voters of DC, National Parks Conservation Association, Potomac Conservancy, Potomac Peddlers Touring Club, Sierra Club-DC Chapter, Washington Canoe Club

Attachments:

- Letter of 5/11/04 from Sheila Rabb Weidenfeld, Chairman, C&O Canal National Historical Park Advisory Commission to Carol J. Mitten, Chair, DC Zoning Commission
- Letter of 4/14/05 from Sally Strain to NPS-Director Fran Mainella (with photos) - Balloon demonstration to show actual height of the proposed GU boathouse.
- Architectural renderings of three boathouse alternative plans: The current GU boathouse proposal; A smaller collegiate boathouse at the Dempsey site, between the Washington Canoe Club and the Potomac Boat Club near Key Bridge; the Georgetown “Universal” Boathouse at 34th St.
- Fact sheet produced by Defenders of Potomac River Parkland –“Private development in C&O or preservation of YOUR park?”