To: Bill O’Keefe

From: Ross Pilling & Denis Lucey

Date: 04/12/2021

Minority Report Re: Dissenting votes to CHCA DRC Sub-committee to not approve the requested zoning variance (with conditions) to allow residential use at 30 West Highland Ave

Cc: Committee members

Please accept this as notice of our dissenting and negative vote to the DRC sub-committee reviewing the plans of the buildings proposed for the location at 30 West Highland Ave. The process and proposed outcome do not reflect current development goals and vision expressed by the neighbors of the project. They have seen little community benefit. There have been several suggestions for compromise alternatives. All have been rejected by the applicant.

Since the existing contributing historic building is not on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, it is not protected from demolition, even without this zoning variance. We understand that the applicant has applied for and received a demolition permit from the City. This application was submitted on February 15 and was issued on March 25, while discussions with the sub-committee had been ongoing for several weeks. There remain strong community concerns that the building could have found functional utility under different development scenarios. Contributing historic buildings are as key in defining an historic district as are notable monuments.

The primary objection to the project has been on the table since October of last year. The DRC minutes of 10/20/2020 includes comments from the committee discussion noting, “the size, scope and scale of the project on the community and street,” “the scale of the project is a problem’” “Height is a problem as is massing, “concerned about density, form and massing,” plus other comments about the scale of the building as it relates to Highland Ave. The neighbors subsequently and independently came to the same conclusion as the DRC but have seen no reason to change their opinion. The immediate neighborhood is diverse in architecture and its citizens are diverse economically and socially. Overall, houses are modest - singles, twins and row houses. There are incidental large houses. Front side and back gardens are small but treasured. It has a village ambiance.

The general understanding is that to supersede a zoning rejection and secure a subsequent zoning variance, the applicant was compelled to create detailed drawings of the project that cost substantial sums of money. The applicant has been diligent about protecting that investment and the scope of the project as drawn.

The applicant has been insistent from the outset that there be no fewer than eight units, each with a double garage and an elevator in an arguably four plus story monolithic structure of institutional appearance.

Starting on February 15 of this year, 197 comments, indicating deep concerns, were submitted by near neighbors to a community forum focused on the project. A clear majority, 63%, have indicated concerns about massing, scale and design. Please see the pie chart attached for a summary of the concerns expressed.

The DRC zoom call on March 16 elicited comments from the community both in direct messages to the project monitor as well as chat comments. In the over one hour and 15 minutes of discussion, a clear majority of the respondents were not in favor of the project and many comments were stated in strong terms.

Conversations with the applicant have been ongoing and many changes have been made in architectural details to mask the mass and density. There are improvements but few of the changes are truly responsive to the major concerns expressed. As of yesterday, these changes were made public on the CHCA website. The neighbors can now review the project and will find that it still has too many units and is too large. The scale of the development is based on the need for eight units, two-car garages per unit and interior elevators. There has been no serious discussion around a development of twin homes with freestanding garages at grade. There has been no serious, in depth discussion of two units facing Highland Ave with diminished front elevations, three units in a cluster and two in another.

The neighborhood is unable to come to grips with a building that has little relationship to the street with no discernible front door. The pedestrian view from the sidewalk at street level is of an arched garage window, and the parking lot entry of the west elevation (one that is heavily travelled en route to Weavers Way), is of an uninterrupted building including six, two-car garages, 142 feet long. The neighborhood also seems unable to relate to a building that has heated living space on four floors plus a pilot house and roof deck on a fifth level. The effect of this project is of a development that wants little to no interaction with its neighbors and pedestrians. The project could be appropriate adjacent to a suburban office park or in an urban setting on a long block with 4-5 story structures.

This project is relatively inattentive to green issues and may in fact be hazardous to an adjacent grove of walnut trees. Other landscaping remains ill-defined.

We are aware of the city’s desire to increase population for tax revenues. This project will receive a 10-year tax abatement. We are also aware of the many commercial vacancies on the hill. Eight, sixteen or twenty-four new residents should not be seen as a panacea to this issue in the era of online shopping. A development that promotes walkability would help more.

Concerns remain about pedestrian safety, street congestion, changing traffic patterns from the exit alley with no guiding signage and congestion from delivery, trash removal and moving trucks parked in the loading zone in the front and western side of the development.

This is the wrong project for this site and this neighborhood. The community should oppose granting any zoning relief until truly substantive changes are made.