

Land Use Planning

The Chevy Chase Land Company was largely responsible for the planned development of Chevy Chase. The company built the first houses in 1907. The area east of Connecticut Avenue was to be residential. Senator Francis G. Newlands, President of the Chevy Chase Land Company, hired Leon Dessez, a prominent architect, to design the houses. The residential nature of the community has continued through the years to the present day. The land was sold under covenants; houses had to cost at least \$5,000 on Connecticut Avenue and at least \$3,000 on side streets; Jewish and black people were not allowed to buy or build homes in the area. These covenants were removed by a Supreme Court decision in 1948.

Only a few stores to service the community were permitted initially, on the west side of Connecticut Avenue. (In the early 1920s, 5526 Connecticut Avenue, where Magruders' Grocers is now located, was the home of a branch of the Piggly Wiggly Store, one of the nation's first self-service grocery stores. Although the self-service system was extremely successful, Piggly Wiggly sold out in 1935 to another popular grocery chain, which was bought by Safeway Stores, Inc.) Prior to World War II, commercial development from Albemarle Street to Chevy Chase Circle was confined to one block between Fessenden Street and Nebraska Avenue and to four blocks on the west side of Connecticut Avenue from Livingston Street to Chevy Chase Circle. .

After the covenant was removed, the association supported the establishment in 1954 of the national headquarters building of the Printing Industry of America at the Circle. This building enhanced the area and provided desirable land usage. The association opposed commercial development on the east side of Connecticut Avenue but later endorsed the National Bank of Washington and Safeway buildings on the east side. The association influenced the design of the bus terminal the Lamp and Shade Center, the National Permanent Bank, the Riggs National Bank (now PNC Bank) buildings on the west side of Connecticut Avenue to be in harmony with a residential community. The association successfully opposed the construction of an eight-story office building at Connecticut Avenue and Morrison Street, where an Exxon station is now located.

Early in the 1960s, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics wanted to build an embassy-chancery on the Bonnie Brae Estate on Oregon Avenue. The association, in conjunction with the Hawthorn Association and others, vigorously opposed a change in the zoning of this land. In a court action, the residential zoning of this land was upheld. In a column that appeared in The New York Times May 11, 1963, Russell Baker humorously described the contest between residents of Chevy Chase and the Soviet government (see below).

Later it was proposed to construct over one hundred townhouses on this land. The association opposed this dense development, preferring single-family residences on the land. The association was not successful in restricting the land usage to single-family residences, but the number of townhouses was reduced. Some people question whether this Chatsworth development on Bonnie Brae is a better land use solution than the embassy-chancery would have been. In the 1970s, the association, in collaboration with Advisory Neighborhood Commission 3G, successfully opposed a Chatsworth-type development to the north on Oregon Avenue.

New York Times, May 11, 1963

By Russell Baker

Washington, May 10—The Hawthorne and Chevy Chase citizens associations are eyeball to eyeball here with the combined power of the Soviet and United States Governments, and nobody has blinked yet.

At issue is a Soviet plan to build a \$2,000,000 embassy and chancery on a choice piece of residential real estate overlooking Rock Creek Park in northwest Washington. Property owners in that part of town are aggressively unenthusiastic.

An Embassy for an Embassy

The White House and State Department are with the Soviets, but in a very quiet way. They would not like the notion to get about that the White House and State Department are leaning on the citizens of Chevy Chase to gratify Russians.

The explanation is that this Government would like to build a new American embassy in Moscow. Everyone agrees that the present one is a rundown old pile. The Soviets have made it apparent, however, that a new American embassy in Moscow must mean a new Soviet embassy in the territory of the Hawthorne and Chevy Chase citizens associations.

The Soviet embassy here is also a rundown old pile cramped between the local Hilton and a traffic underpass with barely enough driveway to hold two limousines. Its rear abuts the thundering presses of The Washington Post and it faces, directly across 16th Street, the Philip L. Murray Building where irascible American trade unionists are forever leaving the windows lit nights to form a bright Christian cross on their building's facade.

Here surely, in the mutual East-West need for office space, is the opportunity for a rare agreement between Washington and Moscow. The Russians proceeded to acquire 15 acres on Oregon Avenue and produced plans for a four-story institutional structure.

Soviet Intelligence Fails

Well, we all could have told the Russians and the White House and the State Department what was going to happen.

Steady, everyone could have told the Russians. You are not dealing now with Bulgarians and Chinese, but with the organized upper middle class American homeowner, blooded veteran of a thousand victories over encroachers.

In tackling the Chevy Chase sector, the Russians were particularly ill-advised. Any man-in-the-street in Washington could have informed Moscow that the associated citizenry of Chevy Chase is one of the most formidable powers in America today. Their record of detecting and turning back commercial infiltration is surpassed only by their achievement in winning more “stop” signs per capita than any other American suburb.

Fulbright to the Rescue

In any case, the clumsy Soviet thrust, with its awkward support from State and White House, was quickly blunted by the superior skill and experience of the Hawthorne and Chevy Chase citizens association. Both superpowers quickly found themselves floundering before a brilliant series of delaying actions, while the civic battlers moved to gather allies for counteroffensive.

It found them in the Washington Board of Zoning Adjustment, which is mighty independent of the White House and mighty particular about what is built in residential neighborhoods, and in Senator J.W. Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Mr. Fulbright lives far from Chevy Chase, but he, too, has been irritated lately by an outbreak of embassies in the quiet of his neighborhood, and wants to put an end to such nuisances in residential districts all over town. The heat has been intense on the zoning board, whose approval is essential for the embassy’s construction. So far, there has been no sign of a blink from either side.

Man and Superstate

It would be bad if a civilized solution to both nations’ embassy housing problems cannot be found, but it is hard not to cheer for the citizens of Hawthorne and Chevy Chase. Victories by people over organizations become increasingly rare in today’s world.

It is that rarest exception of all—comic, absurd, hopelessly out-numbered man triumphing over the state’s super-organization that makes the cold war bearable.

After long discussions with the developer, a covenant was agreed and entered into the land records keeping the development within the spirit of the zoning for the area.

The association opposed the conversion of the Regency House on Connecticut Avenue from a private apartment house to a District facility for low-income and handicapped persons. The opposition was based in part on the excessive cost of the building and the displacements of many elderly residents. The association did not succeed in stopping this project. The District obtained funds from private foundations to supplement appropriated funds to purchase the building. Despite this initial opposition, the new residents of Regency House have become well-accepted neighbors.

A large commercial development in Maryland and the District was planned in the early 1970s around the intersection of Western and Wisconsin Avenues. The association opposed this development on the ground that it would have caused an intolerable traffic problem, and sponsored the formation of the Friendship Neighborhood Coalition with other citizens groups in Maryland and the District in order to influence the orderly development of the Friendship Heights area. Charles N. Mason, President of the association at that time, represented the association and was influential in the coalition. The other representatives of the association were Geraldine Linder and the late Rosalind Jamison. (For the many contributions of Rosalind Jamison to the community on zoning and land usage, a tree was planted in her memory at the northwest corner of the Chevy Chase Library grounds.) The planned overdevelopment was stopped. The coalition presented a plan for land use around the Friendship Metro Station, but the District virtually ignored it. As an outgrowth of the Friendship Heights problem, the Wisconsin Avenue Corridor Committee was formed to plan and influence the land use of the Wisconsin Avenue Corridor from the Potomac River in Georgetown to Western Avenue. This committee, known as WACC, has been successful in preventing some undesirable developments, although its carefully drafted plan was not accepted by the District. Although the Van Ness Metro Station and neighborhood development was outside our area, the association joined with other citizens associations to influence the design and attractiveness of new construction.

The association reviewed and commented on several drafts of the comprehensive plan for the District. The comprehensive plan was submitted to the D.C. City Council in 1983 for approval. There remained many objections to the plan, and citizens groups have requested a six-month delay in approval in order to study the plan and comment constructively on it. The association has also been concerned about the preservation of historic buildings and supported groups that unsuccessfully tried to save Rhodes Tavern at 15th and F Streets. The electorate by a 3-to-2 majority expressed the same desire to save Rhodes Tavern in November 1983.

Transportation

All public transportation was provided by private companies in the District until the current publicly owned Metro system superseded the private companies on January 14, 1973. Bus transportation reached its peak in the early 1970s, when the oil embargo forced many commuters to use public transportation. The opening of Metrorail service and the increase in oil supplies have aided the planned decrease in bus usage and service. The Chevy Chase Citizens Association has strived to keep some through-bus service to downtown on Connecticut Avenue, particularly to assist elderly and handicapped people and to provide commuter service to western Constitution Avenue where Metrorail service is not convenient.

The automobile was coming into use about the time the association was founded, and has been a source of problems from the beginning. Dust from unpaved streets was a nuisance in the neighborhood; traffic later caused rough roads. The association succeeded in having Connecticut Avenue paved in the early 1920s, and later Military Road and side streets. In 1943 crosstown bus service on Military Road and McKinley Street began, again through association efforts. Potholes on streets throughout the District have been a continuing problem. As traffic increased during the postwar period, traffic lights, stop signs, pedestrian crossing, and congestion on Connecticut Avenue, McKinley Street, Military Road, Nebraska Avenue, Reno Road, and Wisconsin Avenue have received the attention of the association.

Automobile parking for customers of businesses on Connecticut and Wisconsin Avenues has been a continuing concern. Special compromises and agreements have been reached between neighboring residents and merchants with respect to zoning of residential land used for parking lots. The high cost of downtown parking and the decrease in downtown parking lots led to all-day commuter parking on side streets adjacent to Connecticut and Wisconsin Avenues. Most residents on these streets petitioned the District government for restricted parking by nonresidents. Two- or three-hour daytime parking restrictions, except for residents with valid parking stickers, were established on most streets near the two major avenues. Nevertheless, parking in the area has remained inadequate, particularly for the commercial area west of Connecticut Avenue. .