

Position Paper on the Jefferson Garage Project

June 24, 2003

Who we are

The Design Advocacy Group (DAG) is an all-volunteer association of approximately ninety design professionals and other advocates of good design whose mission is to advocate high quality urban design, architecture, and preservation in the Philadelphia region. See the DAG profile attached.

The Jefferson Garage Project

DAG has learned about plans for a new parking garage to be built for Jefferson Hospital on the south side of Chestnut Street between 9th and 10th Streets. DAG invited Jefferson and its design team to meet with us, and our understanding of the project is based upon the information provided at this meeting by the Jefferson team.

We understand that the entire block between 9th and 10th, Chestnut and Sansom, is now controlled by Jefferson and/or its development partner, InterPark. The garage project incorporates eight levels of parking (seven enclosed plus the roof) above one level of retail. The initial capacity is 700 cars with a structural capacity to add an additional two levels, for a total of 900 cars. The garage would include support for a potential bridge across 10th Street. Curb cuts are proposed for Chestnut and 10th Streets. Portions of the block along Ninth Street and Sansom Street are reserved for future development. The garage itself would fill approximately half of the block between Chestnut and Sansom Streets.

The project received approval in the fall of 2002 from the Planning Commission in spite of the lack of support from the Executive Director and the Chairman. It is currently before the Zoning Board of Adjustment seeking approval for several variances from the current Philadelphia planning and zoning requirements, the most notable including those for exceeding the 500-car limit, putting a curb cut on Chestnut St., exceeding the 50' height limit, and exceeding the 100' width limit. The next hearing will take place on July 16, 2003.

Our process

In addition to the private meeting with Jefferson representatives, DAG has discussed this project extensively internally and with other interested groups. We have reviewed the action of the Planning Commission, and sent representatives to the first zoning hearing.

Our Position

We believe that construction of this project would be contrary to the public interest and bad urban design. We therefore oppose granting of the variances requested. We urge Jefferson University and Hospital to develop a new and more appropriate design for this important site.

Our reasoning

Here is how we have arrived at this position. In our opinion:

1. The building is in the wrong place. The result of this is that the long axis of the garage is along Chestnut Street, presenting an essentially lifeless façade to the public for most of the block. Since Jefferson with its partner controls the entire block, other approaches are possible and easy to imagine. The opportunity to design an entire city block is a “chance of a lifetime” in the course of urban development and we believe the current plan does not adequately address this civic responsibility.

2. The garage will put the entire block in shade throughout the day for much of the year. The 50’ height limit provision in the zoning code is there to preserve some sunlight on this important retail street

3. A 700 car garage is huge, and with the potential to expand to 900 cars even worse. It will concentrate too many vehicles in one location, resulting in a very high rate of ingress and egress movements that are dangerous to pedestrians. It is only one block from a similar large garage and near many smaller garages.

4. The proposed mid-block curb cut will interrupt the natural flow of pedestrian movement. The provision in the zoning code prohibiting such curb cuts is there to avoid such interruptions. Currently there are no mid-block curb cuts on the south side of Chestnut Street between the Customs House and Nineteenth Street.

5. The project will damage the visual character of the public environment. It will be completely out of scale with the typical single storefront buildings that give Philadelphia’s best retail areas their pleasant and inviting pedestrian character. The zoning code limits individual buildings in this area to a width of 100’ in order to preserve this character. In the 1000 block is another Jefferson building that already exceeds this limit and also employs a similar scale of openings to those proposed for the garage.

6. The project will undermine preservation efforts by diminishing the physical context for several outstanding historic buildings immediately adjacent. These include the Victory Building (1873-90), the old Federal Reserve Bank by Paul Cret (1930), the Post Office and old Federal Court House by Harry Sternfeld and Ballinger (1937-41), and the Benjamin Franklin Hotel by Horace Trumbauer (1925).

7. A ground floor of retail does not justify eight levels of parking above. Jefferson claims that a garage with retail on the first floor is necessary to bridge the “retail gap” in Chestnut Street. This would be true for any project built in this block and there are many other upper story uses, such as residential or office, that would attract high quality retail. Retail in parking garages is usually considered second-class space because

the constraints of the garage function overwhelm the diversity associated with a good shopping street.

8. We are concerned about Jefferson's previous track record with Chestnut Street retail. If the character of retail that will exist on the ground floor is anything like the retail in Jefferson's other full block building on Chestnut Street in the block directly west, between 10th and 11th, it will further diminish the public environment. Most of the storefronts in the existing building have been given over to offices or other medical uses.

9. The project will undermine efforts currently underway to revitalize Chestnut Street. The City needs a thriving, diverse, pedestrian friendly retail street to link the historical district with the Avenue of the Arts. This point has been made by the developer of the Victory building adjacent to the site.

10. We feel that there has been inadequate public review of Jefferson's development plans. This project should not be considered in isolation. The block taken as a whole offers a potent opportunity for the development of a carefully designed mix of uses, and its planning is of great importance to the general public. We would hope that as one of Philadelphia's most respected institutions and important corporate citizens, Jefferson would exemplify the highest standards of disclosure and clarity in its master planning and development.

11. We believe there are no "hardships" that would justify zoning variances. This is a flat site that extends for an entire block. There is plenty of space and access to deal with the functional requirements.

12. We fear that approval of the variances requested would deprive the public of the benefits of accepted urban planning principles, as reflected in the zoning code. One of the main reasons for having a zoning code is to regulate the quality of the built environment. This project would violate carefully developed planning recommendations that were made to preserve the public interest.

Conclusion

Jefferson University is an extremely important institution in the Philadelphia Region, and its parking needs deserve attention, but there are less harmful and downright positive design solutions that would meet them. We believe this project would have a disastrous impact on the public environment, and we urge that it be re-designed. We believe that the current situation is likely to lead to extensive time-consuming hearings that could invite legal action that will benefit neither Jefferson nor the public. There is clearly a better way—that would be for Jefferson to withdraw this plan and to prepare a new design that takes these considerations into account in a manner that is appropriate for a world class medical institution in a world class city.

DESIGN
ADVOCACY
GROUP
of Philadelphia

For immediate release

For more information, please contact:

William P. Becker, Chair
Design Advocacy Group
Becker & Frondorf
1500 Walnut St. Suite 1910
Philadelphia, PA 19102
215.772.1400
wbecker@beckerfrondorf.com

George L. Clafien, Jr.
Chair, DAG Jefferson Garage Sub-committee
Clafien Associates
Architects & Planners
1619 Walnut Street Suite 510
Philadelphia, PA 19103
215.564.0878
gclafien@clafienassociates.com