

Testimony of James D. Berry, Jr.
President, Bates Area Civic Association, Inc.

Before the
DC Public Charter School Board

Re:

The Proposal of the Latin American Youth Center to Locate a Public Charter School in the former John F. Cook Elementary School Building, 30 P Street, N.W., for 150 Students between the ages of 16 and 24 Years, along with a Residential Facility for 50 Homeless Students.

April 19, 2010

Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen,

My name is James Berry and I appear before you tonight to express the several concerns of the Bates Area Civic Association, Inc. about the current proposal of the Latin American Youth Center (LAYC) to locate a charter school in the former John F. Cook Elementary School building, 30 P Street, N.W., for 150 students between the ages of 16 and 24 years, along with a residential facility for 50 homeless students.

The former John F. Cook Elementary School site that the LAYC has chosen is located in the Metropolitan Police Department's Patrol Service Area 501. More specifically, it is located near a portion of the North Capitol Street corridor that is locally renowned for the presence of open-air drug activity as well as a remarkably high level of community violence. For years, our Association has tried to work closely and cooperatively with the Metropolitan Police Department to gain a firm grip on these dire social circumstances, with very limited success. Despite our best efforts over the years, the area around North Capitol and P Streets, N.W. has received the designation of Red Zone, Hot Zone as well as several other identifiers that distinguish it from other neighborhoods around the city. This has been the case, essentially, because of the frequency of illicit drug activity as well as the crimes of violence that, sadly, have taken place at or about this location in abundant numbers – conditions that have been due, in part, to warring factions of drug dealers who struggle to control the trade of their wares in our area as well as, often times, to disputes between and among the users of illicit drugs who loiter on that section of North Capitol Street on a daily basis and who have done so for many years. It is our understanding that within the last 48 hours, two men were found on the North Capitol Street corridor (one near the corner of N. Capitol and O

and another near the corner of N. Capitol and P Streets) suffering from gun shot wounds, by an as yet unidentified assailant. Indeed, given the history of the area that I know about and have lived with for many years, I am at a loss to understand why LAYC officials would take the risk of introducing their students to these unfortunate circumstances. And, while I have no hesitancy in predicting that they will refer to their experience in Columbia Heights as a frame of reference for their confidence, I have repeatedly and respectfully indicated to them that the North Capitol community is not Columbia Heights.

Adding to these troubled circumstances is our own District of Columbia Department of Health (DOH). That is, for a number of days per week the DOH parks a mobile drug unit on North Capitol Street, N.W., between P Street and Florida Avenue, to pass out hypodermic needles, condoms and other tools to prevent the spread of HIV, to the sizable number of heroin addicts who now frequent this location as a result of the DOH mobile unit's presence. The pre-existing social problems in the vicinity of North Capitol and P Streets, N.W. have been exacerbated by the presence and activities of the mobile drug unit. That is, the number of addicts who now frequent this location have exploded in recent times and, perhaps needless to say, this condition has had an incredibly adverse impact upon small businesses in the area (like the new Subway shop that opened at this location). These small businesses are literally fighting for their economic survival, essentially, because often one has to pass through a gauntlet of drug users and addicts to get into their respective establishments. The owner of the new Subway has appealed to our organization on more than one occasion to assist him in working with local government agencies and our elected officials to help improve this situation. Specifically, this merchant is concerned that his new and fledgling business will not survive, largely because of the loitering and other

aggravating behavior that many of these offenders bring to the corridor and even try to bring into his establishment. In fact, we became so alarmed by the circumstances at this location that our Association is in the process of organizing a Community Task Force of stakeholders to come together to try to find effective strategies by which to address these concerns and hopefully attract other quality businesses to our area.

In our best judgment, the social backdrop I have described is not an appropriate one in which to situate often vulnerable and impressionable youths, simply because a building happens to be unoccupied and available. In fact, a number of years ago, Associates for the Renewal of Education (A.R.E.) attempted to operate a public charter school at the former John Mercer Langston Elementary School building, 45 P Street, N.W., for children who were under the jurisdiction of what is now the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services. While our organization had (and still has) great respect for A.R.E. as early childhood education advocates, we also strongly discouraged them from trying to open their charter school at this troubled location, but our advice was not heeded. In large part due to the pre-existing social conditions in the area, combined with the frequent clashes that the youngsters from A.R.E. had with members of what are nowadays commonly referred to as “crews” or informally organized groups of kids in our area who have tended to be involved in delinquent activity, the “A.R.E. experiment” proved to be an abysmal failure, by all accounts. In fact, during much of the time that A.R.E. operated their charter school (albeit, for adjudicated children) at 45 P Street, N.W., the leadership of that organization frequently solicited our assistance in getting the Metropolitan Police Department to give special attention to the area around their school in protection of their students. And, admittedly, for reasons not entirely related to the social

circumstances around the school (but certainly influenced by them), the A.R.E. charter school eventually closed.

Like A.R.E., the members of our organization have a great deal of respect for the work that the LAYC has done in the Columbia Heights community of Ward One and we all share the belief that their Youth Build approach to education, vocational training and employment is quite laudable. However, very simply and directly, the proposal of the LAYC to locate a charter school for 150 students between the ages of 16 and 24 years, along with a residential facility for 50 homeless students, at 30 P Street, N.W., does not enjoy the support of any of the community organizations in our area (to my knowledge), nor does it have the support of the ANC that represents the community into which they would like to come.

In a resolution to Washington, D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty that was passed by our membership regarding this matter, we expressed our respect for the good work with children for which LAYC is known throughout the District of Columbia and we asked Mayor Fenty to use the power of his office to assist them in finding a more appropriate and suitable location in which to operate a charter school for 150 students, between the ages of 16 and 24 years, along with a residential facility for 50 homeless students, than the site they have chosen in the North Capitol community. Finally and fundamentally, it is our firm and committed belief that one does not place vulnerable and possibly troubled youths in social circumstances that will certainly and significantly challenge their ability to keep their respective energies in solid pursuit of socially productive goals, if one's principal interest is their ultimate success in life.

I thank you for giving me this opportunity to share the views of the Bates Area Civic Association, Inc. on this subject!

JDB