

Testimony Presented to the Montgomery County Council

Council Hearing on the Westbard Sector Plan

February 4, 2016

Presented by: Rev. Sterling King, Jr., Pastor
Macedonia Baptist Church
5119 River Road
Bethesda, Maryland 20816

Introduction and Historical Note:

To the Chairman and members of the Council, my name is Rev. Sterling King, Jr. I come before you tonight in my capacity as pastor of the Macedonia Baptist Church, which is located at 5119 River Road in Bethesda. Our congregation was founded in Bethesda in 1920, and the year 2016 marks the 96th year of its existence. I have been blessed to serve as its pastor for the past 27 years. Some years ago, there was a vital, thriving Black community on River Road in the vicinity of the church. A compelling number of individuals and a great variety of events have contributed to the formation of the history of Macedonia Baptist Church. And the history of Macedonia is connected with the larger history of the earlier Black community of River Road. A number of our members owned property in close proximity to the church and were leaders in our church and in the community. The legacy and family names of some of our River Road ancestors have been enshrined in history books, on street signs, and in public records. Our little church on the hill on River Road is the only entity which still exists that calls our attention to an African American community of Bethesda that once was.

Specific Issues of Interest to Macedonia Baptist Church in the Westbard Sector Plan Planning Board Draft:

- 1. Retain the African American Street Names:** At a public hearing on the Westbard Sector Plan in December 2015, Macedonia Baptist Church requested of the Planning Board that the names of two streets that are anchored in the history of our African American River Road ancestors not be changed. These streets are: **Clipper Lane**, which intersects River Road and runs along the west side of the church; and **Dorsey Lane**, which intersects River Road and is the next street over west of Clipper Lane. Both streets are north of River Road and east of the Capital Crescent Trail. The names of members of the Clipper family and the Dorsey family, along with other deceased members, are recorded on a memorial plaque that is displayed in the sanctuary of the church. The Westbard Sector Plan Planning Board Draft on page 68 recommends retaining these street names, and we ask that you support this recommendation.
- 2. Protect Access from River Road to the Church Parking Lot on Clipper Lane:** Our church is served by a small parking lot on Clipper Lane behind the church. We ask that that the Clipper Lane entrance from River Road be maintained to ensure easy access to the church and its parking lot.

- 3. Ensure the Height Compatibility of any New Building on the Bank of America Site:** As you can see from the photo on page 57 of the Planning Board Draft, our small church, on land zoned R-60, is flanked to the south by a high rise building, The Kenwood. To the north across the narrow Clipper Lane is the low rise Bank of America. If the Bank of America site redevelops under the proposed CRT zoning, we could be flanked on that side by a 75' building. A building of this height would tower over us and further reduce the visibility of our church from River Road. We understand that the Zoning Ordinance's height compatibility requirements would not protect our church, because our church building, though on single-family residentially zoned land, is not in residential use. To remedy this, the Plan added language on 68, last bullet, to require that height compatibility requirements be applied at the time the Bank of America site redevelops. We ask that you ensure that the Plan language and proposed zoning are adequate to protect our church from incompatible development.
- 4. Support the Plan's Focus on History:** Few people these days know the long history of the area now known as Westbard. We believe the area's history matters and should be commemorated. Therefore we ask the Council to retain the historical narrative in the Plan and support the Plan's history recommendations, including for historically-oriented public art and interpretive signage.
- 5. Add Protocols to the Plan for the African American Cemetery Site:** During a Westbard Planning Board worksession on the naturalization of the Willett Branch, Parks Department noted that prior to any site disturbance or construction, it would conduct an archaeological survey and interpretation of a site that was likely once an African American cemetery. The site, which flanks the Willett Branch west of River Road, was never owned by the church, but church members remember headstones there. We support archaeological investigations prior to site disturbance (by Parks or private land owners), in order to protect any remaining graves, and we ask that we be consulted as part of the descendant community. We also ask that these archaeological protocols be mentioned in the Plan and that the cemetery be placed on the Montgomery County Cemetery Inventory so that its existence is documented.

Thank you for consideration of these points, and we look forward to working with you during worksessions.