



Public Space Committee
1100 Fourth Street SW
Washington, DC

December 17, 2015

Re # 113157
3401 MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE NW
Permittee: Mariya Sadykov. Owner: Embassy of Norway

Thank you for allowing Restore Mass Ave to present this statement today.

Grand Avenues, built in many American cities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, were “linear promenades of elegant residences.” They were “broad streets intended to impress” and “imbued with civic function.” A best-selling urban design book in 1904 called them “open-air salons of the street.” ^{1/}

By 1904 the original five miles of Massachusetts Avenue in the District of Columbia, which L’Enfant laid out as the longest transverse thoroughfare, had been extended for another two miles, from Florida Avenue to Wisconsin Avenue. That year the road’s extension was planted with double rows of American linden trees: 500, or “half a thousand” as reported in *The Washington Post*. Amazingly several of these original lindens survive, including some on and near the Embassy of Norway, where a proposed front yard fence will be reviewed by the PSC today.

The Commission of Fine Arts in 1973 and 1975 published two volumes on Massachusetts Avenue architecture. These documented the provenance and architectural details of the important mansions, including many already lost downtown. The CFA studies were influential in the National Park Service’s award of historic status to the part of the avenue west from 17th Street in 1974. The NPS Nomination Form frequently referenced the connecting landscape of trees, lawns, park and “rus in urbe” effect of the avenue of the early 1970s. The trees were then suffering with many lost.

Three decades later, Restore Mass Ave formed to call attention to this unique surviving street scape. ^{2/} We learned these two miles may be the last intact Grand Avenue landscape in the United States. We stress that preserving and restoring this landscape is not only a local but a city and national cause. Given our wonderful “green” embassy partners, our cause is international.

Our booklet, *A Grand Avenue Revival: Massachusetts Avenue Landscape History & Design Guide*, showed step by step how we can recreate the park-like landscape, 40' deep strips of open lawns, the second row of trees inside the sidewalk, and a first tree row alongside the curbs. 3/



LEFT: Sidewalk allée of American lindens in the 2000 block of Mass Ave in 1913. Photo: DC Public Library.

BELOW: The Royal Norwegian Embassy at 3401 Mass Ave. When photographed in 2007, it had two large “second row” lindens possibly planted in 1904.



As you know, the 40' deep strips of public land along the sides of the avenue inside the sidewalk are termed “the parking.” The term refers not to cars but “park” i.e. lawn and trees. The sides of DC streets, especially its great avenues, were to be ‘parked’ in accord with urban design ideals of the late 19th and 20th centuries.

The “parking” landscape in front of the Royal Norwegian Embassy is the model we have urged others to follow. It visually serves the avenue’s civic function by linking the lovely façade to the public roadway. Two 1904 lindens framed the focal statue and doorway. *A Grand Avenue Revival* used a 2007 photo of this address to show how landscape can marry public space and private building.



LEFT: Embassy of Norway landscape. Slide is from RMA briefing to State Dept Office of Foreign Missions.

Image is Fig. 34 in *Grand Avenue Revival*. The dashed lines show the “parking.”

Open lawns, open views. Fences?

What is the role of fences in this continuous parked streetscape? None.

Our group has had success in getting visual barriers in the “parking” removed, and preventing new ones. Barriers can be walls, fencing and even rows of arborvitae whose goal is to subtract the front yard from public space.

So we are very concerned that residents and foreign governments attempts to zone off this public land. On the issue of security, we urge foreign governments to realize that this two-mile area is not suitable for walled compounds or the appearance of them. When a government needs that level of security we hope they will locate those facilities elsewhere. Meanwhile their historic Mass Ave properties can be symbols of confidence and openness and advance the civic function of a grand avenue

Restore Mass Ave, therefore, must oppose any fence. That said, the one proposed today is distinctive for less visually disruptive. We commend the Embassy and its Architect for having worked toward this solution.

The impact of construction is an equal RMA concern, with regard to this projects and others planned or carried out in the public parking on Embassy Row. Preservation of tree canopy is a great goal, loudly supported. But the reality is that big old trees, maturing middle-aged trees, and young trees - the future canopy – too often are walloped by machines, trenching, even permitted uses of the site. Of course RMA wants to protect the 330 trees we have arranged here, but the ruin of existing canopy by construction activity is an issue city-wide.

An example of how we express this concern, was the plan for a fence by the Apostolic Nunciature (BZA #19013) earlier this year. RMA opposed any installation that could threaten the remarkable row of six 1904 lindens in front of the Vatican Embassy.



LEFT: Second row lindens, likely planted in 1904, in the “parking” by 3339 Mass Ave, the Apostolic Nunciature. RMA photo April 2015.

We pitched in to help find a better solution. We wrote to Diocese representatives stressing the importance of open, park like landscape to Embassy Row and the unique value of those lovely trees. In coordination with ANC 3 C, we requested a Tree Protection Plan be submitted. Our consultant, a professional arborist not affiliated with any tree company, met with representatives of those proposing the fence to discuss gates, fence footings, underground wiring, etc. The Office of Planning then proposed another route. In

any event, the proposal was withdrawn, leaving the important historic landscape at 3339 Massachusetts Avenue intact and making the present Norway Embassy plan a more important model.

Norway Fence Plan of 12-16-2015

Restore Mass Ave has followed the evolution of the proposed Norway Embassy fence to the plan before the PSC today. In keeping with our stance of 'no fences' we do not endorse the plan. But we do not oppose it, either, knowing the plan evolved from careful consideration of arboreal and historic factors and respect for city procedures.

Overall, this proposal has many tree protection features which our group supports. First, the Urban Forestry Administration believes that with this fence design and construction commitments, the fence is less potentially destructive to the big linden on the north corner and the 5" linden near of 34th Street. There appear to be protections for the street trees. Our group is not expert on the details of fence post and gate construction, nor on tree protection steps such as fencing; but if the UFA experts are satisfied, so are we.

Aesthetically, the plan maintains an impression of openness with the minimal character of the iron posts and wider spacing of the fence footers. So while our position remains "no fence," we appreciate that the Embassy and its team have the goal of keeping the historic character of this landscape as much as possible.

Finally, we thank the Embassy and Morrison Architects for their orderly process with respect to city agencies, and being sensitive to historic design as well as arboreal issues, even at some cost in the schedule. We're aware that a lot of preparation has gone into today's meeting and commend you all for it.

Many other neighbors and thousands of commuters passing in 25,000 vehicles per day, on bike and on foot will benefit from your patient process.

Trees vs. Construction

We can all look forward to the construction phase. Local neighbors, the ANC, and our group will follow the work with interest. We hope that this project can be a model during the construction phase, and afterwards.

In fact, there have been negative examples along Mass Ave and other sites, where RMA has been powerless to stop harm to major legacy trees and other trees from construction activity. We have found that, under existing city rules, many activities which harm trees is allowed, or if unallowed, is hard to punish. Meanwhile the trees are lost – right off and in following years. "Oh well. We'll start over with a 2-inch tree," is not good enough.



Because so many trees are harmed by construction Restore Mass Ave and ANC 3 C began a list of flaws in the city permitting process. Advised by experts, we proposed Eight Tree Protections for DC Zoning. We filed them to Zoning Regulations Review last September. The text is on our website PDF page <http://restoremassave.org/download-pdfs/>.

Needless harm to trees from construction occurs city-wide;. So ANC 3 C, 3 B, and 2 D filed similar proposals with the ZRR. More may be found on our Partnering with the City page <http://restoremassave.org/partnering-with-the-city/>.

The goal of the Eight Protections is to save healthy tree canopy in advance of construction -- as the Embassy has done in today's plan -- during construction and afterwards. Post-construction harm, for example, includes die off of branches and roots caused by trenching or heavy loads compacting the soil. The Eight Protections also protect trees adjoining the site for which a permit is sought, whether on private or public land.

We invite the PSC and the Office of Planning to take an interest in our upcoming Trees vs. Construction initiative. In 2016 we will seek these protections through other means as well as zoning. We hope these protections, publicized even before becoming city rules, will save trees. The Norway Fence project could be a model on this score.



Today, is not the end! If the PSC approves the fence, it will be the end of the beginning. Restore Mass Ave has high expectations the Embassy future work will be exemplary as well.

On all counts, we thank you.

Deborah Shapley

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1/ Jan Cigliano and Sarah Landau, *The Grand American Avenue: 1850-1920*. P. xi. The 1904 urban planner quoted is Charles Mulford Robinson.

2/ *Restore Mass Ave* concentrates on these two miles of “Mass Ave” and some feeder streets. Since starting in 2006 we have arranged more than 330 new trees to rebuild the major canopy and double rows of 100 years ago.

To date some 70 property owners along Embassy Row including about 40 embassies participate in the program, getting new trees and taking care of public and private trees. We are all-volunteer. Trees have been helped by more than 100 Treekeepers since we started. We enjoy excellent relations with the Urban Forestry Administration of DDOT, the Office of Planning, the State Department, Casey Trees, and others. We are funded by individuals in the community

3/ Last May the book was honored with a 2015 Award for Excellence in Historic Preservation in the field of Education.