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May 24, 2017

Marnique Heath
Chair, D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board
1100 4th Street, SW
Suite E650
Washington, D.C. 20024

**Re: HPA #16-053, application for concept approval of Washington
International School project at Tregaron**

Dear Chair Heath and Members of the Board,

This application represents a significant crossroads in the history of the Tregaron landmark at 3100 Macomb Street in the Cleveland Park Historic District. At issue is the importance of the unified design of country house and landscape as mutually supportive in creating an atmosphere of tranquility, beauty and intentional land use.

Historic preservation exists to celebrate art captured in building design, landscape design, site planning and execution. The best examples illustrate how the built environment can relate another time, a different style of living, an influential and new way of approaching nature. Tregaron was borne from the creative genius of a notable country house architect, Charles Platt, and the independent vision of an emerging female landscape artist, Ellen Biddle Shipman. We honor Tregaron because the unusual vision to elevate the landscape into equal partnership with the beautiful structures was successful and more than one hundred years after its creation it still inspires and teaches us about artistic vision.

The applicant, Washington International School (WIS), stresses its need for more specialized educational program space and deflates its project's potential permanent effect on spatial relationships and the historic form and integrity of the landmark by stating that its proposed building will be no taller than residential houses on Macomb Street and it can create new walls,

stairs and landscaping to mask the building for much of the year. In addition, the applicant, in rationalizing its site selection, weaves a non-historical scenario that the driveway from Macomb Street was an afterthought in the estate design, a back door, something unimportant and, therefore, the area bordered by the driveway merits very little, if any, protection from development. This argument conflicts with the intentional and comprehensive design plan of Platt and Shipman.

The application should be assessed partly for its effect on characterizing defining features on the landmark and the driveway, as part of a planned circulation system, is such a feature. The Tregaron Cultural Landscape Report¹ (CLR), prepared by nationally recognized Heritage Landscapes, describes the construction of the Macomb entrance and joining of this segment of the driveway to the Causeway as forming “a continuous circuit through the property. The graceful curves of the entrance drive reflected the sinuous alignment of the southern entrance and Causeway Bridge as it leads up toward the hilltop and mansion.”² The CLR continues that the “mission of the Tregaron Conservancy for this area is to draw on historical antecedents and recapture the beauty and dignity of the Macomb entrance and drive.”³ Specifically, the CLR recommended

- removal of invasive plants and hazardous trees
- removal of the winding wooden staircase
- construction of a new pedestrian pathway along the edge of the drive with a fork in the pathway to lead toward WIS buildings
- replanting of hillside with flowering dogwoods and broadleaf evergreen shrubs such as rhododendrons and azaleas, with a few areas planted with oak and beech trees, to create “a backdrop for the entry experience” (Page VI.16)
- repair of original stone retaining walls on the east side of the drive [and]
- milling driveway asphalt, reconstruction of cobble gutters, and repair of original drains, including pipes and outflows.

The construction of a building in this landscape will permanently alter the character defining feature of the Macomb entrance. An institutional building will dominate the intended experience of the driveway curving around a treed slope with ample flowering trees and

¹ Tregaron Partnership Ltd. retained Heritage Landscapes to research plans, maps, and photos of the landmark and develop a cultural landscape report that included detailed development suggestions, which were submitted to the HPRB as part of TPL’s application for subdivision of 8 housing lots, and later to the Mayor’s Agent. Subsequently, the Tregaron Conservancy received a National Trust for Historic Preservation grant to retain Heritage Landscapes to complete the CLR in 2007 by adding Chapters V and VI, which resulted in a comprehensive guide to preservation treatment and management of the property. The Macomb entrance and Woodland Slope are discussed in Chapter VI and WIS stated at the Advisory Neighborhood Commission 3C meeting on May 15, 2017 that it did not endorse Chapter VI since it was written after WIS endorsed the draft CLR during the HPRB and Mayor’s Agent proceedings. Thus, WIS now challenges Heritage Landscapes research and substitutes its conclusions about Platt and Shipman’s intent.

² Tregaron Cultural Landscape Report, Page VI.14

³ CLR, Page VI.15

shrubs, which are prominent features throughout the landscape. If the slope is replanted densely so as to hide the contemporary building the intended spatial relationship of an artistically landscaped dappled slope ending in an imposing ridge will be foreshortened and presented as an overplanted, dense wood.

This application also presents a very frank request to alter the context and the integrity of the estate's support structures. The proposal to remove the brick patterned courtyard fronting the Carriage House and replace it with a modern, continuous brick roadway extending from the driveway past the Gardener's Cottage and Greenhouse will remove historic context and reduce these structures to indistinguishable structures on an academic campus. The proposal to brick in the formal garden, presumably so that students can walk on it, brings it one step closer to being removed. In 2006, the HPRB insisted on a deadline with penalties if WIS did not remove the DACHA so that the formal garden could be restored and the carefully planned spatial relationships and organizing elements of the mansion and its surroundings could be viewed as intended. Today the non-contributing DACHA not only covers part of the formal garden, it also covers one of the most spectacular views across Twin Oaks to the Washington National Cathedral.

WIS also proposes to raise the ground level of the area west of the Carriage House so that they can build with minimal excavation, but this proposal will result in burying the first floor of the western end of the Carriage House. This group of proposals affecting the historic presentation of support structures will unify and brand the property west of the mansion as institutional. The school is straightforward in its intention, but it describes the result as a combination of improving what hasn't been maintained or as unifying disparate academic building architectural styles. It would be unfortunate if the school's unhappiness with its building program to date is solved by diminishing the historical significance of original estate features.

Parking garages are rare on landmark property. The most visited sites must confront visitors and transportation. But Tregaron is fortunate to be within a few blocks of a major Metrorail station and a block from multiple bus lines. Despite its location, it is undeniable that parking on the estate is a problem that negatively affects the landmark. The areas where parking should be removed are the Causeway and the areas around the mansion. The school's parking garage proposal will not change parking at those locations. It would remove 41 cars from the existing 43-50 car surface parking area that is not seen from any significant view sheds and is, in fact, hidden behind the Woodland Slope's brick retaining wall and behind the Carriage House. The issue becomes whether the Woodland Slope should be altered beyond the alteration of the proposed academic building with an additional structure for cars that are not negatively affecting the landmark? Removal of most of the cars in this area (buses would still be parked behind the Carriage House) is necessitated by the design of the new building. It will capture most of the footprint of the parking area. Is this a wise and supportable design option for the landmark? Should a more stringent and enforceable parking policy be created for Tregaron

before a parking garage is approved and should a parking garage be considered as a compromise only if it removes all cars from sensitive areas of the landmark?

I appreciate the opportunity to share my views on this application with the HPRB. I represent the neighborhood that includes Tregaron on Advisory Neighborhood Commission 3C and have been involved in that capacity with all of the WIS and Tregaron-related issues since 2001. I have been the ANC 3C representative on the Tregaron Conservancy Board of Directors since its inception in 2006. I sincerely believe that the HPRB - as it has throughout Tregaron's modern history - holds the keys to the future essence of this landmark. In 2006, the HPRB made the bold decision to support and encourage an historic plan to try to recapture the beauty and integrity of the landmark. It was a successful gamble. Now the school is presenting a challenge – it wants to grow and it wants to begin to use parts of the site that are planned for some form of preservation. I trust the HPRB will be thoughtful and wise in its decision.

Sincerely,

Nancy J. MacWood
ANC 3C09