Campaign for Bethesda’s Madonna of the Trail Statue

7209 Fairfax Road

Bethesda, Maryland 20184

 June 27, 2019

Gwen Wright

Director

Montgomery County Planning Department

8787 Georgia Ave.

Silver Spring, MD 20910

Dear Director Wright,

Under the auspices of the Maryland State Society Daughters of the American Revolution, which owns the Madonna of the Trail Statue in downtown Bethesda, the Steering Committee of the Campaign for Bethesda’s Madonna of the Trail Statue would like to formally request consideration by your Department that this historic monument be relocated from the entrance to the underground garage of the Hyatt Hotel to the Farm Women’s Co-op Market site (“Market Site”) as part of the renovation and additional park settings contemplated for the Market Site. In addition, we would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you in person to introduce ourselves and the Campaign.

As you know, in June 2018, Carol Dorsey Larkin, then-State Regent of the Maryland DAR, wrote to you regarding her concern, as the owner of the statue, with its location and condition. At your suggestion, we have followed up that letter by meeting with your staff, including Historic Preservation Supervisor Rebeccah Ballo and Area 1 Planning Team representative Robert Kronenberg. They have been very helpful guiding us regarding the permitting and approval processes that need to accompany any restoration or relocation of the Madonna statue. However, in light of the ongoing negotiations over the future of the Farm Women’s Market site and the public campaign we are launching, we wish now to formalize our request that the Planning Department consider the relocation to the Market site as part of our continuing effort to raise funds to move and repair existing damage.

It is our view that the Madonna of the Trail could be incorporated into the renovation of the Market Site to the benefit of both the statue and the Market site, which both are reminders of the strength and spirit of women. The Madonna is the most important historic public statue in our town, and it is the first statue dedicated to and depicting a woman in the state of Maryland. She is the first of 12 identical statues that mark the National Old Trails Road from Georgetown to the Pacific Ocean, tracing the path west and reminding us that it was the spirit of pioneer women that made it possible to build the United States of America.

The significance of this statue was well understood when it was first unveiled on April 19, 1929. 5000 people gathered to hear speeches from dignitaries led by then-Judge Harry S. Truman. But development of the Red Line forced her off her original site on the corner of Montgomery and Wisconsin Avenues to a mid-block location placing her next to the entrance driveway to the Hyatt Hotel garage. In December 2004, the statue tilted on its foundation due to a sinkhole from a water main break, necessitating her removal from her pedestal by crane and stored offsite until the ground was stabilized and she could be brought back to the same spot.

Our Campaign has begun to remedy several problems with her current location:

1. Normally, one would want to keep her on her “historic location,” but the Metro elevator shaft now occupies that location.
2. Her current location sits on top of the Red Line, so that subway cars rumble beneath her all day and night, vibrating the granite and grout and degrading her condition, and this situation may be getting worse with the use of heavier trains.
3. She is the only Madonna statue facing east when the entire point is to honor the courage and spirit of pioneer women as they headed WEST into the wilderness. We need to face her in the direction of the other 11 identical Madonna statues that mark the trails west.
4. Her current location renders her an afterthought in our streetscape. As one writer put it in 2004, the statue sits “usually unnoticed among the high-rise and hubbub of downtown Bethesda.”

She needs to be moved.

We believe the redevelopment around the Farm Women’s Co-op Market Site affords our town a unique opportunity to remedy these problems and re-establish an important focal point for Bethesda through wise planning and design. The statue could be integrated into the Market Site’s adjacent eating areas and green spaces in a way that makes sense historically and aesthetically. She would remain connected to Wisconsin Avenue and the National Old Trails Road, she could face west, and we could mitigate forever any concern about vibrations from the Red Line. This would reinforce her special status as Maryland’s first statue depicting a woman, lift her up to a new level of prominence in the streetscape of Bethesda, and integrate her into a location where it is hoped that the citizens of Bethesda, Chevy Chase and the rest of Montgomery County will chose to relax, enjoy outdoor meals, and visit the adjacent parkland.

The Campaign for Bethesda’s Madonna of the Trail is a petition-based effort to educate our fellow citizens about this opportunity. We intend to increase our public presence with a press release about this request, activation of a website, and social media the week of July 15. We would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you at your earliest convenience to introduce ourselves and to discuss further the goals of the Campaign.

Thank you for your consideration.

The Steering Committee of the Campaign for Bethesda’s Madonna of the Trail

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