

# JOHN P. GEHAN

---

1008 Fairmount Ave. ● St. Paul, MN 55105-3102 ● 651-222-8237  
johngehan@comcast.net

**Date:** April 10, 2017

**To:** St. Paul City Council members; Jerome Benner II, DSI

**Via:** Contact-Council@ci.stpaul.mn.us, Jerome.Benner.II@ci.stpaul.mn.us

**Re:** Proposed Linwood School variances

I am an alumnus of Linwood School. I have lived on the same block as Linwood School for 33 years, and grew up a few blocks away. My mother and uncles attended Linwood. My children and grandchildren all have attended public schools. I have been an eyewitness to Linwood for 67 years. I want to see Linwood thrive. But this proposal will help neither Linwood nor the community.

There are many reasons to reject the zoning variances requested by the St. Paul Public Schools for a proposed expansion of Linwood School. Among them are:

- The proposed expansion is too big, too tall, too massive for the miniaturized Linwood site. It would be fine at another larger site, but not at Linwood.
- The proposed expansion will have negative consequences for the surrounding neighborhood, including increased traffic and decreased safety, inadequate parking, loss of open green space in the community, and others.
- The expansion will result in the loss of vital outside playground area for the Linwood schoolchildren. Playground space is very important for the Linwood kids.
- The proposal is inconsistent with both the neighborhood plan and city's Comprehensive Plan.

Essentially, the proposal attempts to put too many kids, too many teachers and staff, too many cars and busses, and too many programs into a space that can't support them. The motivation for the expansion appears to be driven by the planners' needs to manage attendance at various schools, not by the needs of the Linwood children. If it weren't for this multi-school attendance juggling, school planners would never consider putting such an oversized building on such a small lot.

However, **the central reason** the St. Paul City Council should reject the expansion proposal is that it fails to meet the requirements contained in City Code. The Code specifies six criteria that must be met before a variance is granted. Those criteria are:

- The variance is in harmony with the general purposes and intent of the zoning code.
- The variance is consistent with the comprehensive plan.
- The applicant has established that there are practical difficulties in complying with the provision, that the property owner proposes to use the property in a reasonable manner not permitted by the provision. Economic considerations alone do not constitute practical difficulties.
- The plight of the landowner is due to circumstances unique to the property not created by the landowner.
- The variance will not permit any use that is not allowed in the zoning district where the affected land is located.
- The variance will not alter the essential character of the surrounding area.

In granting a variance, the Board of Zoning Appeals (BZA) must make written findings stating the grounds upon which the variance is justified. In February, the BZA accepted a flawed staff recommendation, on a split vote, with little board discussion, to approve the variances. Even a cursory review of the staff report reveals that five of those six criteria were not met by the expansion proposal.

Perhaps the most egregious of the BZA findings relates to *Criterion Four*: “*The plight of the landowner is due to circumstances unique to the property not created by the landowner.*” **In fact, the desire of the landowners (the public schools) to expand programming is the sole reason for the variance request. There is absolutely nothing unique about the Linwood site other than it is too small for the oversized building. The “plight” of applicants has been entirely created by applicants themselves.**

For over 100 years, the neighborhood has welcomed Linwood School and its children, often assisting with groundskeeping, playground construction, and volunteering. Over the years, many residents and their children have attended Linwood School and have worked hard to create a supportive and friendly atmosphere for the school. Since this proposal was first revealed to the neighborhood over one year ago, the neighbors have repeatedly stated that they support reasonable improvements to the school that create a great learning environment for the students. Based on what many neighbors have said to me, they continue to support efforts to find a reasonable compromise.

**I hope the City Council will enforce the City Code and find that the requirements for the variances have not been met.**