

Debbie Thiersch - Land Use Commission Continuance Presentation Transcript

Good evening. I'm Debbie Thiersch. I live at 624 Isabella Street. Less than 1000 feet from the U2 athletic campus district. My neighbors and I are significantly impacted by many events held at the U2 district, not just stadium-capacity events.

Much of the discussion has focused on the detrimental impacts of stadium concerts, but I want to focus my time on traffic and parking congestion that occurs at smaller events. Significant delays and congestion occur at events where the crowd size exceeds the capacity of the East and West Ryan Field Lots. Together, these lots hold about 1,400 cars, which is enough to accommodate events with 3,500-3,800 attendees. Since Welsh Ryan Arena holds about 7,000 attendees, sold-out events result in significant congestion and a parking shortage. Thousands of cars are forced to find parking elsewhere. In addition, there are only a few 2-lane streets, (a single-LANE going each way), that provide access to the U2 district, which makes it difficult to access Northwestern's lots.

Let me show what happens at a sold-out basketball game at Welsh Ryan arena.

This photo shows a traffic officer at the north end of the Ryan Field West parking lot.

The officer is directing traffic, in good weather, as fans arrive for a sold-out 8:00 pm basketball game on February 15th, 2023.

Next is a video at the same time, in the same location, near the intersection of Ashland and Isabella.

(Video of traffic gridlock on Isabella and cars driving quickly down alley to bypass it.)

This is an example of congestion and unsafe driving on our streets and down our alleys to bypass the congestion. This congestion is not a 1-time aberration, I have lived here for many years and it happens when events at the U2 property exceed the available adjacent parking, and it happens even when an officer is directing traffic.

The Kimley-Horn report classifies this location as a Category A "Level of Service" (unimpeded movement, free-flow conditions) on all approaches before and after sold-out concerts. Based on this video, it is not credible to classify this location as "Level A" for a 28,500-person event when the actual delays are obvious for events with $\frac{1}{4}$ the number of attendees. I also want to point out that there are other similar examples in the report where Level of Service categories are underestimated.

We are not quibbling with Northwestern holding collegiate basketball games 15-18 times per year. But there could be an unlimited number of events of this size according to the text amendment. The whole point of showing you this video is that Northwestern is requesting permission to host an unlimited number of 10,000 person events, and 60 of these can be outdoors with a limit of 7,500 – all of which would be larger than sold-out Welsh Ryan Arena

events where traffic and parking issues are known problems. These events could occur on any day of the year, far more than the number that currently occur.

In addition, I want to bring your attention to another important, but overlooked, line item in the text amendment. Northwestern is requesting to hold amateur sports and athletic events in the U2 district, not just intramural and collegiate events. Amateur sports events are not allowed under the current zoning, but the proposed amendment would allow an unlimited number, with no limits on attendance. In case you were not aware, some amateur sports can be semi-professional, often with organized competitions, leagues, and tournaments that can attract large crowds. For example, the NFL and NBA draft scouting combines fit into this category. They are week-long events that attract a media circus and throngs of fans of 10,000 or more.

Yet, Northwestern has not attempted to evaluate the traffic and parking impacts for these smaller events which are known to have a huge impact on the community. Therefore, this report should be viewed as flawed and incomplete. Evanston city staff have themselves raised similar concerns about the credibility and bias of developer traffic studies. Watch this short video...

(Video of Evanston Director of Community Development and City Engineer)

The Kimley-Horn report is exactly the kind of developer's traffic report that City staff is talking about here, that really contains no credible estimate of the predictable substantial traffic impacts from large events and doesn't even address the traffic congestion caused by all the "smaller" events that Northwestern wants to add.

In conclusion,

Northwestern's proposal requests permission to hold an unlimited number of amateur sports and 10,000-person events. This is far more events than currently occur, and yet no one has evaluated the impact. Just from the evidence we can see of traffic backups during a 7,000-person basketball game, it is obvious that we will experience a huge increase in the number of parking and traffic problems caused by Northwestern events in this residential neighborhood. This will be detrimental to the safety of our streets and the character of this quiet neighborhood.

Having said this, even if the studies were better, there's no real way to fix this traffic congestion. The U2 district simply doesn't have access to the arterial roads and acres of parking that are typically available at similar stadiums. Adding more events, even smaller events, will create far more frequent and intense detrimental impacts on the entire community, impacting both Evanston and Wilmette.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to deny Northwestern's request.