

**BOARD OF APPEALS
for
MONTGOMERY COUNTY**

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Case No. A-6289

PETITION OF WILLIAM WU
(Hearing held June 3, 2009)

OPINION OF THE BOARD
(Effective date of Opinion, July 2, 2009)

This proceeding is a petition pursuant to Section 59-A-4.41 of the Zoning Ordinance (Chap. 59, Mont. Co. Code 1994, as amended) for a variance from Section 59-C-1.323(b)(2). The petitioner proposes the construction of a one-story addition/garage that requires a variance of three (3) feet as it is within seventeen (17) feet of the rear lot line. The required rear lot line setback is twenty (20) feet

Peter Sorge, the petitioner's designer, appeared with petitioner at the public hearing.

The subject property is Lot 31, Block 3, Alta Vista Subdivision, located at 6 Spruce Tree Court, Bethesda, Maryland, 20814, in the R-60 Zone (Tax Account No. 01857732).

Decision of the Board: Requested variance **granted**.

EVIDENCE PRESENTED TO THE BOARD

1. The petitioner proposes the construction of a 19.6 x 22 foot one-story addition/garage.
2. Mr. Sorge testified that the subject property is an irregularly shaped lot and that the property shares a driveway with two other lots [Lots 22 and 23]. The subject property is 7,915 square feet. See Exhibit Nos. 4(a) [site plan] and 4(b) [existing shared driveway].
3. Mr. Sorge testified that the petitioner's wife is legally blind and that he is seeking a sheltered entrance to the house to provide a safe and covered entrance to get his wife to and from the car. Mr. Sorge testified that the petitioner's lot backs up to a bike path and that the property has been robbed by an individual using the bike path. See Exhibit No. 8 [zoning vicinity map].

4. The petitioner testified that his house is sited at a higher level than the rear yard topography and that the topography of the rear yard slopes downward to the bike path.

FINDINGS OF THE BOARD

Based upon the petitioner's binding testimony and the evidence of record, the Board finds that the variance must be denied. The requested variance does not comply with the applicable standards and requirements set forth in Section 59-G-3.1(a) as follows:

(a) By reason of exceptional narrowness, shallowness, shape, topographical conditions, or other extraordinary situations or conditions peculiar to a specific parcel of property, the strict application of these regulations would result in peculiar or unusual practical difficulties to, or exceptional or undue hardship upon, the owner of such property.

The Board finds that while the shape of the petitioner's lot is irregular, the configuration of the lot does not preclude development on the lot and that any "uniqueness" or "peculiarity" caused by the shape of the lot does not constitute "conditions peculiar to a specific parcel of property" of such a severity that the Board may grant the requested variance.

STANDARDS FOR EVALUATION

Based upon the petitioner's binding testimony and the evidence of record, the Board finds as follows:

The requested variance does not comply with the applicable standards and requirements of the Montgomery County Zoning Ordinance set forth in Section 59-G-3.1. However, the Board finds that the variance can be granted as a reasonable accommodation of the petitioner's wife's disability under Title II of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988 (FHAA) provisions.

Determination of Disability

The ADA and FHAA define a person's disability, or handicap, in pertinent part, as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of (an) individual." 42 U.S.C.A. §12102(2)(A); 42 U.S.C. §3602(h).

Whether an individual has an impairment and whether the impairment substantially limits a major life activity is to be determined on a case-by-case basis. *Dadian v. Village of Wilmette*, 269 F.3d 831, 837 (7th Cir. 2001) (citations omitted).

Prohibition on Housing Discrimination Based on Disability

The FHAA and Title II of the ADA prohibit housing discrimination based on an individual's handicap or disability.

The FHAA prohibits discrimination against "any person in the terms, conditions or privileges of sale or rental of a dwelling, or in the provision of services or facilities in connection with such dwelling" on the basis of that person's handicap. 42 U.S.C.A. § 3604(f)(2). The FHAA definition of discrimination includes a refusal to make reasonable accommodations in "rules, policies, practices or services when such accommodation may be necessary to afford" a person with a handicap "equal opportunity to use and enjoy a dwelling." 42 U.S.C.A. § 3604(f)(3)(B). A "necessary accommodation" to afford "equal opportunity" under FHAA will be shown where, but for the accommodation, the disabled person seeking the accommodation "will be denied an equal opportunity to enjoy the housing of their choice." [See *Trovato v. City of Manchester, N.H.*, 992 F.Supp. 493, 497 (D.N.H. 1997) (citing *Smith & Lee Assocs. v. City of Taylor*, 102 F3d 781, 795 (6th Cir. 1996).] A failure to make a reasonable accommodation need not be supported by a showing of discriminatory intent. [See *Trovato*, 992 F. Supp. at 497 (citing *Smith*, 102 F.3d at 794-96).]

Reasonable Accommodation by Local Government of an Individual's Disability

The "reasonable accommodation" provision of the FHAA has been interpreted to require municipalities to "change, waive, or make exceptions in their zoning rules to afford people with disabilities the same opportunity to housing as those who are without disabilities." [See *Trovato*, 992 F. Supp. at 497 (citing *Hovsons, Inc. v. Township of Brick*, 89 F.3d 1096, 1103 (3rd Cir. 1996)).] Similarly, Title II of the ADA (42 U.S.C.A. §12132) has been held to apply to zoning decisions, which constitute an "activity" of a public entity within the meaning of the ADA. [See *Mastandrea v. North*, 361 Md. 107, 126, 760 A.2d 677, 687, at n. 16 (citing *Trovato*, 992 F.Supp. at 497).]

Under the ADA, a local jurisdiction is required to reasonably modify its policies when necessary to avoid discrimination on the basis of disability, unless it is shown that the modifications "would fundamentally alter the nature of the service, program or activity." 28 C.F.R. §35.130(b)(7) (1997). Therefore, unless the proposed accommodation would "fundamentally alter or subvert the purposes" of the zoning ordinance, the variance must be granted under Title II of the ADA. [See *Trovato*, 992 F.Supp. at 499.]

Findings of the Board

Based on the above, the Board must make the following findings:

1. Determination of disability: An evaluation of whether a disability exists under the ADA or FHAA requires a three-step analysis. The applicant's medical condition must first be found to constitute a physical impairment. Next, the life

activity upon which the applicant relies must be identified (i.e. walking, independent mobility) and the Board must determine whether it constitutes a major life activity under the ADA and FHAA. Third, the analysis demands an examination of whether the impairment substantially limits the major life activity. *Bragdon v. Abbott*, 524 U.S. 624, 631 (1998).

2. Non-discrimination in housing: The Board must find that the proposed variance constitutes a reasonable accommodation of existing rules or policies necessary to afford a disabled individual equal opportunity to use and enjoy a dwelling.
3. Reasonable modification of local government policies: Because zoning ordinances are among the varieties of local government rules subject to Title II of the ADA and the FHAA, the Board must find that the proposed variance must be granted in order to avoid discrimination on the basis of disability unless the proposed accommodation would fundamentally disrupt the aims of the zoning ordinance.

Applying the above analysis to the requested variance, the Board finds as follows:

1. The Board finds that the need for assistance with general mobility demonstrates that the petitioners' wife's major life activities are restricted. Because of the direct impact of the petitioner's wife's blindness on her major life activities, the Board finds that a disability exists pursuant to the definitions in the ADA and FHAA. The Board finds that the proposed construction of a one-story addition/garage would permit safe and covered ingress and egress for the petitioner's wife to their home.
2. The Board finds that the proposed one-story addition/garage will not undermine the intent of the zoning ordinance. Additions/garages added to existing homes are commonly found in residential areas such as the R-60 Zone in which the subject property is located, and are consistent with the intent of the zoning ordinance to promote a residential scale and streetscape in residential zones.

The Board further finds that, although the proposed construction of a one-story addition/garage requires a variance pursuant to the rear lot line setback requirements of Section 59-C-1.323(b)(2), the grant of the variance would not create a non-conforming condition under the general requirements of Section 59-C-1.323 for the R-60 Zone. Accordingly, the proposed construction will not impair the intent, purpose, and integrity of the general plan affecting the subject property.

Therefore, based upon the petitioner's binding testimony and the evidence of record, the Board finds that the grant of the requested variance is a reasonable accommodation of the petitioner's wife's disability because (1) it will not fundamentally alter or subvert the purposes of the zoning ordinance; and (2) the proposed construction is necessary to permit the petitioner's wife a safe and covered ingress and egress to and from their home.

Accordingly, the requested variance of three (3) feet from the required twenty (20) foot rear lot line setback is **granted** subject to the following conditions:

1. The petitioner shall be bound by all of his testimony and exhibits of record, the testimony of his witness, to the extent that such evidence and representations are identified in the Board's Opinion granting the variance.
2. Construction must be completed according to plans entered in the record as Exhibit Nos. 4(a) and 4(b) [site plans] and 5(a) through 5(c) [elevations].

The Board adopted the following Resolution:

BE IT RESOLVED by the Board of Appeals for Montgomery County, Maryland, that the Opinion stated above is adopted as the Resolution required by law as its decision on the above entitled petition.

On a motion by David K. Perdue, seconded by Carolyn J. Shawaker, with Walter S. Booth, Stanley B. Boyd and Catherine G. Titus, Chair, in agreement, the Board adopted the foregoing Resolution.

Catherine G. Titus
Chair, Montgomery County Board of Appeals

I do hereby certify that the foregoing Opinion was officially entered in the Opinion Book of the County Board of Appeals this 2nd day of July, 2009.

Katherine Freeman
Executive Director

NOTE:

See Section 59-A-4.53 of the Zoning Ordinance regarding the twelve-month period within which the variance granted by the Board must be exercised.

The Board shall cause a copy of this Opinion to be recorded among the Land Records of Montgomery County.

Any request for rehearing or reconsideration must be filed within fifteen (15) days after the date of the Opinion is mailed and entered in the Opinion Book (see Section 59-A-4.63 of the County Code). Please see the Board's Rules of Procedure for specific instructions for requesting reconsideration.

Any decision by the County Board of Appeals may, within thirty (30) days after the decision is rendered, be appealed by any person aggrieved by the decision of the Board and a party to the proceeding before it, to the Circuit Court for Montgomery County in accordance with the Maryland Rules of Procedure.

It is each party's responsibility to participate in the Circuit Court action to protect their respective interests. In short, as a party you have a right to protect your interests in this matter by participating in the Circuit Court proceedings, and this right is unaffected by any participation by the County.