Dear Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for this opportunity to present to the City of Houston Parking Commission details of Rice’s proposed Shakespeare Graduate Apartments project. It is our hope that after review of the following information, the members of the Houston Parking Commission will agree that the design as proposed best serves the interests of all who live, work and trade in this unique residential, institutional and commercial neighborhood, and will recommend approval of the related parking variance request.

BACKGROUND

The project encompasses the even numbered addresses from 2402 to 2504 Shakespeare, located on the north side of Shakespeare between Morningside and Kirby in the Morningside Place neighborhood and the University Place super neighborhood. The project began as a possible renovation or replacement of existing university-owned graduate housing at 2402-2414 Shakespeare (even numbered addresses). Rice then had an opportunity to acquire adjacent property (even addresses 2420-2504 Shakespeare) and began exploring the opportunity to build wider rather than higher to accommodate the university’s growing demand for graduate student housing.
DESIGNED WITH OUR NEIGHBORS IN MIND

As we always do when Rice builds on property located off-campus, the university held extensive consultations with area neighbors to identify issues of interest so that these could inform the design process. At these meetings (please see attached list as posted on the project’s informational web site, www.rice.edu/shakespeare), Morningside Place neighbors repeatedly asked Rice to accomplish two things which ordinarily are mutually exclusive: minimize the height of the new building while at the same time preserving green space (i.e., minimizing the building’s footprint).

The resulting design (please see attached diagrams, also available on www.rice.edu/shakespeare) is reflective of a broader commitment Rice has made to preserve the quality of the campus environs by creatively addressing the challenges we all face as our city continues to change, namely finding ways to build responsibly and sustainably, striking an appropriate balance between the inevitability of growth and the necessity of preserving quality of life. For example:

1. By selecting property situated barely 600 feet from the Rice campus, it becomes economically feasible to extend existing campus shuttle routes to serve the proposed Shakespeare Graduate Housing site. This coupled with a bike room which provides secure indoor storage for 100 bicycles will greatly reduce the need for on-site parking, minimizing neighborhood traffic congestion and helping to preserve air quality.

2. Because of the reduced need for on-site parking, less of the property needs to be paved, making it possible to place parking behind the building and out of sight, allowing a greater building setback, and preserving street trees and green space (which in turn improve air quality and minimize storm-water run-off with related street flooding and downstream water quality effects).

3. Because of the reduction in on-site parking demand, the building itself need not increase in height, either because it must be built on top of an oversized, 215-space parking lot, or because the number of units must be increased in order to create the revenue necessary to fund construction and maintenance of a multi-story parking structure.

4. In addition, Morningside Place residents will benefit from the opportunity to ride Rice’s free, air-conditioned shuttles between their neighborhood and the university’s many educational and recreational amenities, while those who live and work on campus will have the option of riding the shuttle to the Village, reducing parking and traffic loads in this already congested district while providing additional business for area merchants.

5. And finally, the project preserves the residential character of the neighborhood (the Rice properties will continue to be just what they are now: rental housing), deteriorating older properties will be replaced with quality new construction, and Rice’s project prevents an outside developer from purchasing these properties for the kind of high rise construction which recently threatened this same neighborhood.

The requested parking variance makes all of these benefits possible.
EXPERIENCE PROVES THAT IT WORKS

Rice University’s first graduate student housing project (1515 Bissonnet, constructed in 1999) has 112 units, 222 beds, and 120 parking spaces. Even though all residents initially were allowed to park vehicles at the site, the lot never approached capacity. After the university instituted paid parking for campus facilities, residents at the Bissonnet apartments were asked to pay $5 to register a vehicle (the same amount that Shakespeare project residents will pay). In the 2006-2007 school year, there were only 71 registered parkers, and peak recorded demand for the site is 80 registered parkers; simply put, when constructing its first graduate housing facility, Rice greatly overestimated parking demand. Our new graduate housing project on Shakespeare is proposed at 137 units in size with 238 beds, and if our requested variance is granted, it will have 94 parking spaces. Our experience at Rice’s other off-campus graduate housing facility on Bissonnet suggests that this variance will allow the university to minimize building height and preserve set-back and green space while posing no hardship for either its graduate student residents or nearby neighbors:

BISSONNET
Peak Year: 80 Registered parkers = 80 spaces / 222 beds = .360 parking spaces/bed
This Year: 71 Registered parkers = 71 spaces / 222 beds = .319 parking spaces/bed

SHAKESPEARE
Proposed: 94 parking spaces / 238 beds = .395 spaces/bed (better, even with the variance)

Because the residents of both facilities are predominantly first-year international students, the percentage who own automobiles is very low; thus, by serving the Shakespeare site with Rice’s professionally maintained and operated campus shuttles (as we already do at the Bissonnet graduate apartments), the need for on-site parking at the Shakespeare facility will be minimized, allowing us to preserve green space, minimize building height, and provide the other community benefits listed on the previous page. With the reduced parking demand, shuttle service, indoor parking for 100 bikes, and free visitor parking available at Rice-owned parking lots barely 600 feet away (already served by the Rice shuttle service), there would seem to be no reason for concern over on-street parking, but should such an issue ever arise, the city's resident parking permit program—which Rice helped to pass—already provides a convenient remedy.

Elevation Rendering Detail
CONCLUSION

Thank you for your time and attention. We at Rice are ever mindful of how fortunate we are to have beautiful neighborhoods and quality retail establishments on our campus perimeter, and believe that we have an everlasting stake in preserving the quality of the campus and its environs for the sake of all who live and work here. It is with this mindset that we approach all construction, whether on our campus or, in this case, on the boundary between commercial properties in the Village and the Morningside Place residential neighborhood, and it is for this reason that we consulted extensively with our neighbors, beginning in May of 2006, on the design of the Shakespeare Graduate Apartments and related issues. We feel that the project as currently designed is respectful of the interests of both residents and merchants, and offers the greatest benefits to all who cherish the unique Houston neighborhood it was designed to enhance. We hope that you agree, and respectfully request your support of our petition for the requested parking variance for the Shakespeare Graduate Apartments.

Cordially,

Greg Marshall
Director of Community & Government Relations
Rice University