



Hearing on the Comprehensive Plan (B23-736)

Thursday, November 12, 2020

Good morning Chairman Mendelson and Council members—

My name is Susan Kimmel and I am the chair of the Ward3Vision Steering Committee. We support smart growth, including walkable and inclusive neighborhoods. I want to voice our support of the proposed legislation to amend the Comprehensive Plan for the first time since 2011 and urge the Council to take swift action and vote it into law before the end of the year. The current pandemic increased the urgency because it has shown a spotlight on the inequalities across the city and we as residents of Ward 3 support the Comprehensive Plan amendments which will begin to redress exclusionary zoning and provide more affordable housing.

As Chairman Mendelson pointed out in a recent meeting, the Comprehensive Plan is aspirational. It paints a picture of how we want to see the city grow over the next 20 years. The proposed legislation includes hundreds of pages and multitudes of provisions but the main themes are clear: We want a city that is more inclusive, equitable, affordable, walkable, with community amenities; we want a city that is environmentally sustainable, and resilient to natural or man-made disasters including public health pandemics. The Office of Planning has done a terrific job proposing measures which advance these goals District-wide.

I would like to concentrate on land use, equity and affordable housing. Article after article point out that exclusionary zoning and other land use restrictions (such as historic preservation) drive up housing prices and rents. San Francisco is the poster child of exclusionary practices leading to extreme housing shortages, homelessness, exorbitant housing costs forcing outward migration and consequently longer commutes, more sprawl and environmental degradation. By contrast, Minneapolis and Portland have recently implemented more inclusionary zoning which allows up to three units to be located on land that had previously been zoned exclusively for single-family. There are lessons to be learned from each example.

The Office of Planning has taken a very wise middle course by recommending changes to the Future Land-Use Map which would allow parcels along major transit corridors to

be rezoned for higher density. As the Chairman has pointed out, this is not a mandate – there is no obligation to rezone. This is not self-actualizing – the rezoning doesn’t happen automatically; each site would require approval by the Zoning Commission. But it is legally binding -- zoning cannot be inconsistent with the Comprehensive Plan and more specifically the land use designation in the FLUM. More intense development will enable better use of scarce urban space for more housing and more residents are needed to support more and better retail and other amenities. It is worth noting that OP’s proposal for Expanded Inclusionary Zoning will capture much of the increase in value from upzoning by requiring higher levels of affordable housing than would otherwise be required.

Ward3Vision applauds OP for lowering the walls of exclusionary zoning in Rock Creek West. By enabling modest increases in allowable density for residential use, more housing can be constructed along transit corridors. This increase in the housing supply will, over time, help reduce the upward pressure on rents throughout the District. And with inclusionary zoning requirements, it will enable the construction of more affordable housing. Expanded IZ will enable an even greater number -- up to 20% of the units.

Though we recognize that IZ units alone will not solve the affordable housing crisis, it is a beginning. Other programs, such as use of city-owned land, are additional tools proposed in the comp plan. Even then, the Comp Plan changes are necessary. For example, the proposed changes to the FLUM are needed to support an imaginative co-development of the Chevy Chase DC Community Center and Library with new affordable housing. But this is a chance to chip away at historic barriers and bring about change.

I don’t want to harp on them, but there have been several missed opportunities along Wisconsin Ave.: mixed use of the Tenleytown library site with residential above and shared public facilities with Janney elementary school; Georgetown Day School’s proposed mixed-use building between Davenport and 42nd St.; and a proposal for a modest, new residential building to replace the existing Fox News building. If the proposed FLUM had been in place, each of these sites would provide even more housing choices for singles and families, as well as contributing to the vitality of one of the Main Streets that make the District so livable and attractive in the first place..

Several years ago, when Ward3Vision conducted a charrette of the Tenleytown Metro station area, residents envisioned re-development of the block where the Whole Foods is located and imagined more homes mixed with shops and restaurants, perhaps some offices, and even recreational uses such as a skating rink. Charrette participants – our neighbors -- noted that the buffer provided by the schools and Fort Reno parkland, and the area’s role as a transportation hub, provided the opportunity for a much more exciting and vibrant neighborhood center than what is there now. Let’s pass this amended plan now so this kind of urban life can thrive.

As you know, there are now a number of projects across the District that are on hold waiting for passage of the Comp Plan before they can move through the review process with the Zoning Commission). Other developers are holding back projects awaiting the Council's action on the Comp Plan. Continued uncertainty has had a chilling effect on the construction of more affordable housing. As we have learned from the past, delay leads to missed opportunities.

We appreciate the opportunity to testify and we understand that the Council is currently reviewing these proposed amendments, but it is important to note that OP has been through a thorough and impressively robust public engagement process. After over 4 years of discussion, hundreds of public meetings, thousands of amendments, and dialog with the ANC's, all the issues you are considering now have been vetted and for the most part endorsed by ANCs throughout the District. Public review and comment is baked into the amendments before you. Now is the time for action.

Ward3vision urges the Council to approve OP's proposed legislation immediately.