



COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
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**Testimony of Phil Mendelson  
Before the Board of Zoning Adjustment  
Regarding Zoning Relief for Emergency Homeless Shelters**

I am Phil Mendelson, Chairman of the Council of the District of Columbia. My purpose in testifying is simple: to explain the Council's support for the location of new emergency shelters for homeless families pursuant to D.C. Law 21-141 (the "Homeless Shelter Replacement Act of 2016").

Early last year, Mayor Muriel Bowser announced a bold plan to replace the use of the former D.C. General Hospital as an emergency shelter for homeless families. Her plan called for replacing the 270 units at D.C. General with six smaller shelters, scattered throughout the city, with up to 50 units in each. At the time, there was considerable anxiety that any proposal for new, neighborhood shelters would meet stiff opposition. But Councilmembers endorsed the Mayor's approach:

"The Council, the current and previous mayors, advocates, stakeholders, and District residents from across the city, have, since it first opened as a shelter, sought to have D.C. General closed and a more humane shelter or system of shelters established for District families experiencing homelessness. ... Though in the past some residents and councilmembers have voiced opposition to the prospect of having shelter facilities in their neighborhoods due to unfounded concerns, consensus has developed within the Council and across the city that sheltering families experiencing homelessness in small, service-enriched facilities in each of the wards is the best approach. Spreading shelters throughout the city also helps to discourage the creation of large concentrations of poverty in just a few wards. And although residents and councilmembers have raised important concerns about various aspects of the plan as proposed in the introduced version of the Bill, the Committee [of the Whole] agrees that developing smaller, better run shelters throughout the city is the right approach." *Page 5, Committee Report on Bill 21-620, May 17, 2016*

However, the Council disagreed with three of the seven sites proposed by the Mayor, and disagreed with the economics of the Mayor's plan – namely, that five of the seven sites would be leased, that the construction of the five leased shelters would be paid for by the District, and that after 15-30 years (each lease being different), the leases would end and the assets would revert to the lessors. Further, appraisals obtained by the Council determined that four of the five leases ranged from "slightly above market" to "extraordinarily" above market.

The Council held a public hearing, lasting almost 12 hours, on March 17, 2016 and over 80 citizens registered to testify. At the hearing, and subsequently, Councilmembers received suggestions for alternative sites. Approximately a dozen alternative sites were placed on the record for Ward 5. At least three alternative sites were proposed for Ward 3. And there were several alternatives for Ward 6, as well.

On May 17<sup>th</sup>, the Council voted unanimously to direct the Mayor to change three of the sites – in Wards 3, 5, and 6 – and to change the economic structure of the plan so that all of the sites would be owned, not leased, by the city. At the same time, the Council appropriated a \$125 million capital budget for the plan.

Regarding Ward 3, the Council considered a number of suggested locations. These included the Mayor's proposed site at 2619 Wisconsin, a former diplomatic residence at 3101 Albemarle, a vacant church at 4100 River Road, Fort Reno, and 3320 Idaho Avenue. Idaho Avenue was considered the best for various reasons. Most important, site acquisition would be the easiest, since 3320 Idaho is already city-owned, and this, in turn, meant site acquisition would be the least expensive. There were other factors, too: except for the Tenleytown properties, Idaho Avenue has the best access to public transportation, grocery, and other stores. And 3320 Idaho is the largest of the various sites except Fort Reno. But Fort Reno was believed to be unavailable. Further, although most of the sites are proximate to single family homes, the Idaho Avenue site involves fewer such homes than the Wisconsin Avenue or Albemarle sites. When all of the factors, including the ones just enumerated, are taken together, all of the suggested locations, including the Mayor's proposal, were less reasonable than 3320 Idaho Avenue.

Regarding Ward 5, the Council considered a number of suggested locations. The Mayor's proposed site was widely criticized and our reasons for rejecting it are detailed in the legislative report accompanying Bill 21-620. Representatives of the Langdon Park Community Association identified alternative locations in a March 8<sup>th</sup> letter to Mayor Bowser; these were discussed by several witnesses at the March 17<sup>th</sup> public hearing. Ultimately, councilmembers considered two locations the most preferable: The Penn Center building located in Eckington (326 R Street) and a former MPD precinct station located at 1700 Rhode Island Avenue, NE. For each, site acquisition would be easiest and cheapest, since the properties are already city-owned and there was community support for the Rhode Island Avenue site. At final reading on the legislation, the Council dropped the Penn Center site because we learned the Public Library already had plans to use the building as it begins renovation of the Martin Luther King Library. When all of the factors, including the ones just mentioned, are taken together, all of the suggested locations, including the Mayor's proposal, were less reasonable than 1700 Rhode Island Avenue.

Regarding Ward 6, the Council considered several suggested sites. The Mayor's proposed site was widely criticized for a variety of reasons, including arguments that the site was too small, development of a shelter would require PUD zoning approval which would be too much of a long and uncertain process, and there might be other constraints given the existence of a church on the site. Initially the Council voted to approve a city-owned site at 2<sup>nd</sup> and K Streets, NW, but the Executive raised concerns regarding federal regulatory approvals, and the city-owned property at 850 Delaware Avenue became more attractive. This Council-selected site also has community support.

My purpose in testifying today is not to get into the intricacies of the zoning relief being sought, but rather to present the public policy underlying the city's request before you, to explain the process behind our decision, and to state the Council's support for these sites for emergency shelters.

I'm happy to answer any questions.