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Testimony before the DC Zoning Commission on Case 05-26

My name is Joe Sternlieb. I am a 20-year resident of the District. I have resided in Ward 3 for 10 years, and in Forest Hills for the last four. I am a city planner, and have been involved in a number of planning, civic, civil rights and service delivery issues in the city over for many years. I served on an ANC in the late 1980's and was an alternate member of the National Capital Planning Commission for a couple of years in the mid-1990's.

I cannot recall coming to testify on a zoning case since leaving the ANC in 1991. However, I felt compelled to do so tonight for two reasons. First I just recently completed Jared Diamond's book, Collapse, which I strongly recommend to all public officials, because it outlines the consequences that societies suffer when they continue to behave in ways that destroy their environment. And second, I have long regretted that I did not participate in the debate over how many housing units to build at the corner of Albemarle and Nebraska some years back.. In that case, as in this one, neighbors and developers fought over a proposal to build greater density around a Metro station and established shopping district.

Both the legal and planning arguments used in that, and this, neighborhood dispute fail to recognize or account for all the impacts caused by greater development than allowed by current zoning.

Based on my studies, travels, and local observations, I have found that greater residential density in places like the proposed development site at 2950 Tilden Street lead to:

1. less overall traffic congestion in the city and in the region because individual cars are used for fewer individual trips than would be the case if the residential units were built further from transit and services.
2. better retail offerings at the neighborhood shopping district because there is a greater population to support it.
3. an increased tax base to share the cost of, and improve, city services.
4. better water quality because development has been clustered rather than scattered.
5. healthier individuals because they are more likely to walk and use public transit – at least some of the time – than if they lived further from transit and services.
6. Less demand for sprawl development which is killing our environment, clogging our roadways and ruining our collective quality of life.

Planning, zoning, and development in the District of Columbia must be forward- rather than backward-thinking. While it may have been appropriate to zone land near Van Ness low density in the 1940's, '50's and '60's, it is no longer so. In the next 20 years our region will add over 1 million residents to its already booming population. At the same time our fragile regional environment cannot take any more car-dependent growth. Looking forward it is incumbent on all elected officials, planners and zoning officials to demand that all the new residential construction that will be needed to accommodate this population growth be done as close to existing infrastructure as possible.

Our region has a limited number of Metro stations and pedestrian oriented shopping and service centers. Van Ness is one of them.

I strongly urge the zoning commission to do everything in its power – and to look for every available tool it can find -- to grant the owner of this land on Tilden Street permission to build the maximum number of residential units that can fit on the site.

COMMISSION
ZONING COMMISSION
District of Columbia
CASE No. 05-26
EXHIBIT No. 94