

TENAC

February 28, 2007

Ms. Sharon Schellin
Secretary to the Zoning Commission
441 4th Street, NW, Room 200 South
Washington, DC 20001

Dear Ms. Schellin:

Many thanks for your assistance in reviewing the Marina View PUD files. I must say the Zoning Commission is a much more pleasant and utilitarian place to research files than in the old days. Kudos to you!

Enclosed is a copy of my testimony in the Fairfield Marina View Towers case, for what it is worth (probably not much). It is also coming in very late, regrettably. I hope it can be included in the file, but if not, I understand. In any event I will be there tonight to say my few words.

Best wishes,

Jim McGrath
Jim McGrath
Chairman

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ZONING COMMISSION
District of Columbia

CASE NO. 05-38

EXHIBIT NO. 51
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Testimony of Jim McGrath, Chairman
D.C. Tenants' Advocacy Coalition (TENAC)
Zoning Commission of the District of Columbia
Hearing on Fairfield Marina View Towers PUD
February 28, 2007

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Commission for hearing my testimony on the Fairfield Marina View Towers PUD application (ZC 0538). I represent TENAC, the D.C. Tenants' Advocacy Coalition (TENAC), the lead tenants' advocacy organization in the District, representing all who live in rental housing. I might add that comprises two-thirds of the city's population. TENAC has been in operation for over 20 years, and I have the honor to be its chairman. Our mission is four-part: (1) We lobby for affordable housing and rent control; (2) We organize tenant associations in rental buildings; (3) We operate a tenant "Hotline" to answer landlord-tenant questions, and attempt to resolve differences; and (4) We testify before the Council on all proposed legislation affecting tenants. We also hold candidate forums in election years.

We are very concerned about this PUD application for several reasons. First of all, we are heavily invested in Southwest Washington, since over the years we have organized tenant associations in most of the rental buildings in the Southwest, including the first Marina View Towers Tenant Association. We are currently involved in serious landlord-tenant issues in nearby buildings, including Waterside Towers, and New Capital Park Towers, where we also helped form tenant associations many years ago.

Second, this PUD application involves what we consider a one-two punch: the loss of a large number of rental apartments and the loss of high-density residential zoning (R5D) and its consequences to a key Southwest residential quadrant. Both underscore, in our opinion, the twin evils facing this city, the rampant development and redevelopment all across the District, fueled by a flood of speculative money flowing into the District, and the accompanying loss of scores of rental housing buildings, and the consequent dramatic decline in the city's rental housing stock. The key factor causing this decline is the conversion craze going on all around us, transforming rental buildings;

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many of them the last bastion of affordable housing in the District into luxury condominiums or high-end luxury rentals, available to only the truly affluent. The latest available statistics (2004) dramatically illustrate this trend. They show that affordable housing in the District shrank by 12,000 units, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

The loss of rental buildings to condominium conversion has endless ramifications, economic, social, demographic, and cultural, all of which are creating great hardship. The economic factor is probably the easiest to trace. As market-rate rents have skyrocketed in recent years, affordable housing has become increasingly rare; rent control has declined precipitously; and rent-controlled buildings have disappeared at an alarming rate.

The social and demographic factors are even more stark. Displacement of District residents, often by eviction, have reached epidemic proportions. For many in this city, conversion of rental buildings into condominiums leads to literally "losing the roof over their heads. Many simply cannot afford to buy. Then under the terms of many of the conversions, most who cannot buy, cannot stay, notwithstanding that they were model tenants in their buildings for decades. Many people in this category become de facto "evictees." Evictions are another tragic phenomenon which has become epidemic in this city. Last year, a Washington Post study published data on evictions, showing that 49,000 people stood before a D.C. Superior Court Judge and were ordered to vacate their apartments, under the watchful eye of the U.S. Marshalls. The Post study also pointed out that virtually none of these "evictees" had counsel, notwithstanding the fact that they were losing the roof over their heads. The cruelist irony of all, of course, is that evictions are the royal road to homelessness, in a city with a glaring lack of shelters for the homeless. Landlords and developers constantly invoke the mantra "market-rate" as entry-level rates for rent are set and condominiums are priced on the market. The "market," however, has become a casino, and the landlords are breaking the bank at Monte Carlo.

Demographically, the city's population has declined steadily over the years, as an out-migration of people continues to flow into the Maryland and Virginia suburbs seeking affordable housing,

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affordable rents, or safe shelter, and increasingly finding the absence of all three.

Conversions have gentrified this city from Capitol Hill to Mount St. Albans, and beyond in all directions, as successive mayors and city administrations seek to turn the entire city into an "Instant Georgetown."

Finally, conversions have led to the decline of tenant associations, the first line of defense for tenants in rental apartment buildings, especially when landlords and developers start throwing money around, as inducements to vote for conversion. These tactics, taken together with a simple majority vote by tenant associations required for conversion, a very low threshold in our opinion, frequently lead to discord, or worse, internecine warfare among competing groups of tenants in a single building, some wanting to buy, some wanting to buy but unable to afford it, and others hopelessly priced out of the market. The latter, left with totally inadequate relocation allowances, are victimized the most. Left with a paltry fist full of dollars from the developers and landlords, they are left to fend for themselves to find alternative housing where there is virtually none.

There must be a better way. We are not talking about commodities here; we are not talking about oil futures, pork bellies, or Reebok Sneakers; we are talking about the roof over people's heads, the sine qua non for survival in America's urban setting, very much including the District of Columbia.

For all of these reasons, I respectfully request that you deny this application.

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