

#08-06

Dear Chairman Hood and members of the Zoning Commission,

It has come to my attention that Councilmember Michael Brown recently sent you a letter concerning the zoning update. Unfortunately, Councilmember Brown's letter contains a number of incorrect statements about the zoning rewrite. While I realize that the period for official public comment before the Zoning Commission on the rewrite has not yet begun, in light of his letter I wanted to ensure that misapprehensions do not spread at this time.

Councilmember Brown's letter charges that the zoning update process is "moving too fast" and "not laying the groundwork" with enough of an "inclusive, collaborative process."

I work with, write about, and try to influence numerous agencies, and if the Office of Planning's conduct on this rewrite is too fast and insufficiently collaborative, I do not know what could possibly qualify as slow enough or collaborative enough. This process has lasted for years, and began with countless public working sessions for public input.

At the time of those initial working groups in 2008 and 2009, I was very unfamiliar with the intricacies of zoning, yet found each meeting very accessible. Planning staff focused on engaging the public not with the legal language but with the substance of what they liked or disliked about their neighborhoods, and incorporated much of that feedback into the ultimate zoning code.

I have found planning staff to be extremely responsive, more so than other agencies. Personally, I have called zoning rewrite staff numerous times to ask questions as I have written articles for Greater Greater Washington or just read through the draft zoning text to formulate comments. They have always either answered the phone or called back promptly.

Many zoning cases involve disagreement. One resident might think a building is too tall, while another would like to see it taller to bring more patrons to neighborhood restaurants. One resident might want to see more space for pedestrians while another might want more bicycle parking.

These are natural debates and the Zoning Commission's process creates a forum for these. However, in almost all cases, the debate turns on matters of opinion. The specifics of the proposal are clear and unambiguous; people disagree on whether they support or oppose those and what they would like to change.

Unfortunately, the ongoing debate over the zoning rewrite has taken a different turn. A number of recent emails on neighborhood listservs make factually false statements and misrepresent the most basic elements of the rewrite. Flyers distributed in some neighborhoods make claims about the rewrite which are easy to disprove. These are not matters of opinion, but basic fact.

A call to the Office of Planning would have cleared up most of the misconceptions. Unfortunately, it appears that many of the opponents of the rewrite are choosing not to avail themselves of these opportunities. Anyone is free to organize however they see fit, but I am very disappointed that, thus far, the debate is revolving around false information rather than genuine points of disagreement.

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Councilmember Brown says that “transit zones” are “a fraught topic.” But from observing the debate on neighborhood listservs, it is clear that they are only fraught because there are more factually false statements going around concerning these than any other element of the rewrite. For example, transit zones do not apply to single-family zones even around transit, yet some of the emails in question claim they do, even after others have pointed out information to the contrary.

I do not agree with every element of the rewrite. This isn’t the time to raise those issues, but I believe that a number of the provisions do not go far enough to accommodate the desires of residents in changing neighborhoods, and have heard from many residents who argued that segments of the proposal are “too timid.” These are matters of opinion which we will all debate at the proper time.

But meanwhile, it would be an enormous shame if any part of this extremely lengthy yet very participative process were derailed in the slightest because of falsehoods and misconceptions. We can’t expect every resident to take the many hours required to read the entire zoning code, but we could hope that anyone organizing in opposition or support do so.

We should expect substantial outreach from our government agencies, but we also frequently demand frugality. I believe residents must do their part to educate their neighbors about government proposals so that all can advocate effectively. That is a large part of why I created Greater Greater Washington. Any agency can always do more outreach, but it would be physically and fiscally impossible for them to speak to every person who hears outright misinformation from another.

Since Councilmember Brown specifically raised a point of policy, let me briefly respond. Accessory dwelling units are one of the most valuable changes in this proposal. It will not “push resident families out” of any neighborhoods in any way; to the contrary, it will enable seniors to age in place. It will also make it easier for young families to buy a property and invest in a neighborhood when they might not otherwise be able to afford one. The largest problem with accessory dwellings is that OP has chosen, unwisely in my view, to exclude accessory dwellings from zones currently designated R-3, and I hope the Commission will reverse this error when the time comes.

Thank you for your extensive time and attention to this important issue which will shape the direction our city grows for generations to come.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Alpert". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

David Alpert

Founder, Greater Greater Washington