

**Written Statement by Cynthia Prather
Board of Zoning Adjustment Hearing
Wednesday, October 10, 2018**

Re: Request for special exemption by Cambridge, LLC (Permit No. B1803208) to convert 1128 Buchanan Street, NW into three condominiums.

My name is Cynthia Prather, currently a co-owner of 1130 Buchanan Street, NW, and I am again writing to express our opposition to the special exemption application for 1128 Buchanan Street. As you are aware, Cambridge, LLC is proposing to convert a single family row house into three-unit condos, in a block zoned RF-1.

My husband and I have expressed our opposition, verbally and in writing to ANC representatives because the proposed renovation could cause damage to our structure, limit the ability for us to develop our own property, block precious light from the southern exposure. Equally, and perhaps even more importantly, we oppose this exemption because it violates the residential zoning for this block, thus changing the family focus of the block and setting a precedent for more invasive development in this residential area.

I'd like to thank ANC 4C for hearing and considering our plea and supporting us. Still, we understand that BZA has the final say on this. I therefore am taking this last opportunity to speak against this special exemption -- for ourselves, the 1100 block of Buchanan Street, and for other blocks zoned RF-1 residential.

I want to focus specifically on the number of units being proposed for the structure. As explained to us by David Vollin at DCRA, the 1100 block of Buchanan Street, NW is an RF-1 residence zone. RF, or "Residential Flat," means that matter of right use is limited to *no more than two dwelling units*. Cambridge, LLC is proposing three. The proposed conversion into three condominiums is nonconforming for the RF-1 zone.

At first glance, developers and reviewers might ask why not allow the exemption. The proposed front facade would be the same, and the property would be improved. A three-unit building may or may not bring a larger number of people than a two-unit building. Off-street parking in the back and environmentally-conscious millenials could address the parking issue.

Upon closer consideration, however, we feel that there are several compelling reasons why this exemption should not be granted.

1. *Buchanan Street is not zoned for that.* There are over 100 designations/zoning categories -- guiding high density, moderate density, commercial, mixed use, residential use for detached, single family, and row houses, single family developments. Those designations are clearly outlined. With its unique mix of row houses and single family homes, the 1100 block of Buchanan Street is one of the first blocks going north along Georgia Avenue that is designated

RF-1. is clearly an RF-1It has been a family-oriented block for generations. The zoning of that property is no secret. It was zoned that way before the property was purchased.

2. *The proposed units are not designed for families.* The proposed renovation includes three units, two of which are one-bedroom units. The third unit, occupying the proposed 2nd and 3rd levels, has a master bedroom on the 2nd level and a bedroom and second master bedroom on the third level. (See Diagram 1a and b). The third unit, the only one with enough space for a family, has no access to the back yard -- no way to take out trash, no way to exit in case of an emergency, and no easy access for a child to get out and play. Further, in models I've seen, the 3 bedroom unit at the top level is the most expensive -- not anything that a family with three-four children could afford. These units are not designed for families with children. Again, these types of developments are allowable in many areas of DC, but the 1100 block of Buchanan Street, which is zoned RF-1.

3. *Conversions like these are taking needed housing inventory.* Article after article suggest that conversions of family homes are being used as part-time residences or even exclusively short-term rentals as a way to pay the mortgage and/or generate income as a rental property. Just a few weeks ago, September 29, 2018 a Washington Post article talked of a bill to be introduced to the city council by Council Member Mendelson partly because the rapid growth of short-term rentals "was reducing the availability of affordable housing and disrupting neighborhoods." The bill, the article said, "will not only return thousands of homes to the city's long-term housing supply *but also protect thousands more from being bought up by outside commercial investors.*" "Commercial airbnb investors are currently taking away available housing that is affordable, in addition to increasing rent, which hurts city residents and is wrong," said Graylin Presbury, president of the DC Federation of Civic Associations. The development proposed for 1128 Buchanan Street seems to be an example of this very scenario.

4. *These conversions are pricing people out.* These types of conversions are contributing to housing prices spiraling at an alarming rate. The city has a homeless problem, which we are trying to address. I was at a meeting with the Georgia Avenue Collaborative about a program for our Homecomers ministry, where she shared that the organization is receiving more and more requests for housing. She added that they are having a much more difficult time finding housing that people can afford, and that that housing is not in this area.

But it's not just the homeless and homecomers who are having trouble. The article, "A Modern Family in a Full House," (*The Washington Post*, August 28, 2018), describes a young (white) couple who created a group home with another couple when they were evicted from their Capitol hill apartment to make room for a big development. As the August 28 article summarized, "Living in cities such as Washington comes with a steep price tag and little space. It's no wonder growing families retreat to suburbs where housing is more affordable."

On a personal note, there my own son and his wife, who struggled to find an affordable three bedroom unit after they had a third child.

Another article, "The 'Nightmare on Buchanan Street' Is on the Market," (*Curbed Washington*, DC, March 30, 2016), tells of a conversion in the 1400 block of Buchanan Street, where a

developer took a single family house and converted it to three units. For *one* of the converted two-bedroom units, the asking price was \$549,900, roughly \$50,000 higher than the median listing price for the entire 20011 zip code!

Who can afford to buy at such prices? For example, GlassDoor reports the average base salary for DC teachers is \$56,718, \$50,976 for fire fighters, and \$71,068 for police officers. These essential citizens would be hard pressed to qualify for loans for these high priced properties. With these kinds of prices, who will be here to staff our city? Who will put out our fires, fix our roads, and protect our streets? Who will be here to populate the schools that we have invested billions of dollars to build and renovate? Who will be here to teach them?

5. *Granting this exemption would set a precedent.* Finally, granting of this special exemption would be the first of its kind on this block. Granting this exemption would set a precedent for other developers to expect exemptions on this block, again which is zoned RF-1.

Yet, despite this zoning, we've been told that in recent years, virtually all of the requests or special exemptions have been approved. Our question is why? Why should developers be allowed to encroach on the areas that are zoned residential? Why have these designations if you're not going to abide by them? Why have these zoning designations if you are going to grant exemptions *carte blanche* ?

In conversation after conversation, I've been referred to the city's comprehensive plan, entitled, "Comprehensive Plan, Growing an Inclusive City, from Vision to Reality." The Introduction, Planning an Inclusive City, talks of Washington, DC as one of the great cities of the world, with the national capital, a global center of knowledge, and the central city of one of America's largest and most prosperous metropolitan areas. It continues: "It is also our home -- a city of great neighborhoods, a vibrant downtown...historic buildings, diverse shopping, renowned institutions, and magnificent parks and natural areas." It acknowledges that the city is changing, and with change there will be excitement and tension, but that the city is striving to be a more "inclusive" city -- to ensure that economic opportunities reach all of our residents and to protect and conserve the things we value most about our communities." (p. 1-1)

p. 2-7: Whether the issue is displacement, the siting of locally undesirable uses, parking impacts, or threats to neighborhood character and stability, development creates tension in the District of Columbia. This tension will only mount as growth pressures increase, *making it even more important to have sound land use policies and development review procedures that mitigate the effects of competing and conflicting uses.* [emphasis added]

Finally, the Comprehensive Plan's section on Household and Population Growth states that the growth plan is based on estimated population growth and average household size, which declined from 2.16 to 2.12 between 2000 and 2005. They offer this caution:

"The biggest unknown in the forecasts is household size. If the District continues to lose families and attract only small one and two-person households, it may well add 57,000 households in the next 2 years with no gain in population. Household size will only be maintained at its current level if the district retains its families, keeps young professionals in the city as they form families,

and provides a healthy environment for new families in its established single family and row house neighborhoods."

In short, the city's own planning document commits us to considering those who have been here for generations as well as those who arrived last week, following established land use policies and procedures, maintaining established single family and row house neighborhoods, and retaining and supporting families. When single family houses are disappearing, family housing is in demand, and affordable housing is at a premium, it would seem that the city would be encouraging developers to build housing that meets those needs, not exempting them from it.

Yet these conversions are happening all over the city. We can see them from our back window - on Allison Street and Iowa Avenue. Fortunately, however, there are some areas, including the 1100 block of Buchanan Street, that are not zoned for this type of development.

There are plenty of areas in this city zoned for heavy density and multiple unit dwellings. The 1100 block of Buchanan Street is not one of them. I'm glad that planners had the foresight to reserve some blocks and areas for families.

Cambridge, LLC and any other developers that want to build multi-unit dwellings, should purchase in areas zoned for multi-unit development and respect the existing designations for RF-1 residential areas.

Please help us preserve the 1100 block of Buchanan Street for families, not developers. Vote no to Cambridge, LLC's request for a special exemption at 1128 Buchanan Street, NW.