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Zoning Hearing Case Number: 02-381  
April 5, 2018

This testimony is in opposition to the request to change the primary use of the lots at 4th & M street SW from office to residential. The requested switch is in response to unforeseen changes in the office market. The argument put forth in our opposition to the switch is based on another unforeseen change -- the value members of the community have found in the open space over the last couple of years. The current usage of the space is more in line with the guidelines set out in the SW Neighborhood Plan (SWNP) and DC Comprehensive Plan than the proposal put forth by the applicant. For these reasons, the SW Residents For Public Space, oppose the switch from office to residential, and recommend the developers meet with additional stakeholders to bring forth a more suitable project for the area.

The SWNP contains 11 guiding principles for how development should go forth in the area. The proposed plan does not adequately address the following principles: preserving and enhancing Southwest culture, preserving neighborhood character, containing development that complements neighborhood character, and does not create the desired vibrant town center as promised.

Guiding Principle #1 in the SWNP is entitled Southwest culture, and sets out to “foster an environment that encourages and embraces cultural and economic diversity.”<sup>1</sup> Southwest residents take pride in the economic, racial, and architectural diversity of their neighborhood. Over the last couple of years, residents have witnessed nine new apartment and condominium buildings begin construction or come online. These new buildings have brought a steady increase in the cost of rent. Increases in rent lead to gentrification and displacement and does not encourage or embrace cultural and economic diversity. Instead, it pushes the neighborhood towards wealth and inequality. The residential building proposed has the bare minimum of 8% affordable housing at 60% Median Family Income (MFI). Since an individual earning minimum wage would not qualify for 60% FMI, it is inaccurate to consider that as affordable. The fact that only 8% will be considered affordable, and that only a few will be family units, does not meet the criteria of embracing cultural and economic diversity, something very important to the SW community.

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<sup>1</sup> Office of Planning, *Southwest Neighborhood Plan*, 67, (2015).

Guiding principle #2 is neighborhood character, which states that development should preserve the varied scale and green character of the neighborhood<sup>2</sup>. The first-stage Planned Unit Development (PUD) authorized the development of eight buildings on the multiple sites with residential, office, and retail uses, significant open spaces and public space improvements, along with the re-opening of 4th Street SW<sup>3</sup>. With the building of the Eliot in the northwest parcel, the planned building in the northeast parcel, and the buildings at 4th & M, there will no longer be any “significant open spaces” in the area. The importance of open spaces is stressed in the DC Comprehensive Plan, as it states that the retention of, “public access to these assets [functional open space] is important to the well-being of surrounding neighborhoods<sup>4</sup>. By open spaces, the Comprehensive Plan is not only talking about parks, but infill sites as well<sup>5</sup>. SW community members shared their appreciation for the open spaces in SW through the SWNP. The nature and number of developments happening in the area has not followed this principle, and as a result, the large open spaces residents once appreciated are being replaced with large, luxury condos. While affordability and welcoming new neighbors is important to SW residents, the character and unique attributes of the neighborhood are just as important. It seems ironic that one of the aspects of the neighborhood that attracts people to it, is being replaced by buildings for people who also want to enjoy those attributes. A more prudent approach is to listen to current residents and incorporate their thoughts into future use.

Over the last couple of years, the lots at 4th & M have been actively used for regularly occurring Friday night markets, Saturday farmers’ markets, and has served as the host space for the 2017 DC State Fair, the 202 Creates Arts Festival, and the 2017 Food Truck Festival. These events have been well attended by neighbors, and have become an important and enjoyable opportunity for residents to connect with one another and support local businesses, organizations, and artists. The proposed buildings will eliminate the possibility of these events taking place in the neighborhood in the future. None of the surrounding parks have the capacity to hold such events. The loss of such a popular and frequently used space will be greatly missed by SW residents, and negatively impact the community.

Guiding principle #10 states that new development should, “develop a strategy for height, density and open space that enhances, acknowledges and complements the

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<sup>2</sup> *Southwest Neighborhood Plan*, 65.

<sup>3</sup> Christine Shiker, *Application for a second-stage PUD & Modification To A First Stage PUD*, 3, (2017).

<sup>4</sup> Office of Planning, *DC Comprehensive Plan, Volume 8: Parks Recreation and Open Space*, 8-33, (2011).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*, at 8-30-1.

character of the neighborhood.” The plan to build two, 140-foot buildings, making them the largest buildings in the area, while also removing the last pieces of open space from the area is in direct contrast the guiding principle. The SWNP advocated for the corner of 4th & M to be used as a space for recreation, such as pop-up agricultural landscapes, temporary food installations, and community gardens<sup>6</sup>. Neither ground-floor retail, or a community center, of which we already have two in the area, will replicate the vibrancy that has been achieved through the markets, fairs, festivals, and casual lounging that is available currently. For the aforementioned reasons, the proposal does not acknowledge or complement the character of the neighb

The SWNP, as well as the goal of the developers, seeks to turn the corner of 4th & M into a thriving town center with an "active street atmosphere, and a high quality public realm<sup>7</sup>." This is an admirable goal that is welcomed by neighbors. Thanks to our ANCs, the developer, and the Southwest Business Improvement District (SW BID), this area has been activated for the past couple of years, and has achieved the lofty goal. Residents have been able to enjoy the outdoor area for planned events, such as those listed previously, and for casual leisure time. The benches, tables, stage area, lighting, and homages to SW have instilled a sense of pride in the neighborhood and have provided an invaluable opportunity for neighbors to connect with one another. The proposal plans to replace this space with large buildings that will not contain any space for these activities to occur. The developers incorrectly assume that providing a community center, and ground floor retail will reach, or surpass the current vibrancy of how the space is being used. There are already two community centers in the neighborhood, and residents would rather spend time outside without having to patronize a store. The current configuration is inviting to people of all backgrounds and income levels, and replacing this with a requirement of purchase, goes against guiding principle #1, and as the number of petitioners represent, against what SW residents want.

The current usage of the lots at 4th and M is more in line with the DC Comprehensive Plan than the proposed plan is. The Comprehensive Plan explicitly states that development should, “encourage the provision of spaces for performances and art events in neighborhood parks, community centers, schools, transit stations, residential developments and public areas in private development.”<sup>8</sup> Since the DC government does not have the land or the dollars to completely meet the recreational needs of its residents, collaboration and partnerships, and community resources need to be

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<sup>6</sup> *Southwest Neighborhood Plan*, 76.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 7.

<sup>8</sup> DC Comprehensive Plan Volume 14: Policy AC 1.1.6.

leveraged to dramatically improve access to open space and recreational services<sup>9</sup>. For this to happen, the definition of “open space” must change in order to meet the threshold the government has set for itself, and must include more than just parkland<sup>10</sup>. Thanks to the work and benevolence of Forest City, the ANC, and the SW BID, the lots at 4th & M have hosted a variety of markets, festivals, and fairs, all of which were well-attended. Those uses are directly in line with the Comprehensive Plan, as the Plan states, “the programming of outdoor space with events and activities (such as performances, arts, and farmers markets) that stimulate streetlife and active use,” should be encouraged<sup>11</sup>. The Comprehensive Plan states that the retention of public access to the spaces described is important to the well-being of the surrounding neighborhoods<sup>12</sup>. The attendance at these events, and the number of people who have petitioned against this proposal can attest to that. Thus, rather than eliminating this space to make way for buildings that do not accommodate these uses, the plans should be re-drafted to accommodate current popular community uses and wants.

Additionally, it encourages, “neighborhood festivals of appropriate scale and location to showcase local culture. Such festivals should be planned and managed in a way that does not adversely affect neighborhood health, welfare, and safety.”<sup>13</sup>

In conclusion, the plan for the lots at 4th & M are a step back from current usage. If the goal is to create a town center that is accepted and suitable for SW residents, our recommendation is that the developer not tell the residents what it should want, but rather listen to the residents about what they like about current usage, and incorporate that into their design plans. Additionally, studies are needed for how the mostly market-rate units would impact local residents in regards to displacement, as well as environmental impact, increased traffic congestion, and the additional pressure placed on public services. These factors are unknown and could potentially harm the livability of the neighborhood.

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<sup>9</sup> *DC Comprehensive Plan*, at 8-30-1.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> *DC Comprehensive Plan*, Policy UD-3.1.12:

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*, at 8-33.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*, at AC 2.2.2.