

April 7, 2005

H Street Main Street
961 H Street, NE
Washington, DC 20002

District of Columbia Office of Zoning
441 4th Street, NW Suite 210 South
Washington, DC 20001

Zoning Commission Members:

The H Street Main Street (HSMS) is a nonprofit organization focused on retail development and revitalization of the H Street, NE corridor. Thank you for providing the organization with this opportunity to comment on the H Street overlay.

Main Street would like to recognize and thank city government staff, especially Karina Ricks, Derek Woody, and David McGettigan, who spent countless hours, met with hundreds of community members, and gave up their evenings to work on this project. They did great work and deserve to be recognized for putting this together and getting neighborhood buy-in on the overlay.

The Overlay

HSMS embraces the vision proposed by the Office of Planning. The organization believes that the H Street corridor must focus on serving our local community and creating a pedestrian-oriented environment. We support the creation of housing, retail, and arts sub-districts. Ultimately, any concerns that we have with the proposed overlay are not with the larger vision but with the particulars of its implementation.

Catholic University Design Studio

In 2004, graduate students in architecture and planning at Catholic University participated in a Spring Urban Design Studio that focused on the H Street corridor. This project was directed by Associate Professor Terrance Williams, FAIA, and funded by a generous grant from Abdo Development.

The studio provided a series of recommendations regarding development on the corridor. Among the most interesting proposals are:

- Over time, double or even triple the existing low-density FAR of 1.5 to 3.0 or 4.5
- Create a public park, similar to Lincoln or Stanton Park, at the eastern end of the H Street corridor to ease the exiting chaos of the six-point intersection.
- Move the public library to the park location at the eastern end of the corridor.
- Where possible, insert new alleys mid-block to service new mixed use buildings on H Street and permit residential owners to develop alley housing units.
- Utilize and augment existing pedestrian gathering places to create nodes of activity,

organize a series of efficient and convenient public transit stops, and provide new economic opportunities for locally owned retail activity

One of the most interesting observations was that the long stretch of H Street needed intermediate places of rest and gathering to create a more vibrant corridor in the long term. These nodes could be small parks, outdoor café space, or even potential outdoor market places. The students found that the two locations that seemed appropriate to locate these nodes were at 8th Street and 13th Street. Currently only bus intersections have furniture along the corridor and the few trees that there are do not provide much shade for pedestrians. Over the long term, a gathering place with furniture and larger clusters of trees would be much more inviting for the community. This would provide public spaces for recreation along the corridor. If the zoning overlay precludes all setbacks, then it will be quite difficult to create these nodes.

At 13th Street, the students proposed to demolish the current library and rebuild a much larger library/civic building at the terminus of the corridor and proposed park space. At 8th Street they suggested a connection with Galludet University to the north and the rest of Capitol Hill to the south

Even if the Zoning Commission does not integrate these ideas into the overlay, we encourage the members to examine and evaluate the proposals before granting any special exceptions or PUDs. There may be some interesting ideas worthy of adaptation and consideration in the CUA proposal.

A two-page summary is attached.

General Comments

Affordable Housing

As you are aware, affordable housing is a concern for many DC residents. HSMS encourages the Zoning Commission to work to ensure that the housing sub-district includes affordable housing. We will not offer any specific recommendations here because we assume that the City Council will consider an inclusionary zoning ordinance this year. However, if no legislation is passed we encourage the Commission to fight for real affordable housing during any special exception or PUD process.

Density

HSMS supports more dense development on the corridor. The organization is worried that, as proposed, the overlay erects barriers that may preclude development. Our greatest concern is the requirement for most new development to go through a review process. Instead of restricting the FAR to 0.5, HSMS suggests increasing it to at least 1.5 for retail while preserving the proposed uses included in the overlay. Additionally, some further evaluation of the transfer of air rights would be worthwhile.

The restrictions on matter of right development in the housing sub-district are a topic of specific concern. A FAR of 0.5 for retail is extremely low. This may lead to a lack of any pedestrian-oriented retail in this sub-district. We are eager to create a vibrant pedestrian environment with retail on the street. We ask that you consider whether the restriction on matter of right development (that is, a 0.5 FAR) would achieve that aim or make it less likely.

This is a matter of real concern since the economy faces fairly serious inflationary pressures. As written this overlay assumes that development in the District will continue unabated in the case of an economic downturn. We are not as confident about this.

Preservation

HSMS believes that the overlay should encourage projects that provide high density development while preserving the corridor's older buildings -- not just their facades. We are concerned that the current language would allow the pasting of old facades on new buildings, which would not actually preserve the historic fabric of the corridor. Positive and negative examples of appropriate preservation techniques can be found nearby. It is our hope that the Commission will encourage preservation-sensitive redevelopment similar to the National Academies and Spy Museum projects rather than facadism, as can be seen in the former Atlantic Building at 930 F Street, NW

Section-by-Section Comments

1320.2(e)

Add: "Encourage adaptive reuse of older buildings along the corridor and an attractive combination of new and old buildings."

HSMS agrees with incentives to preserve pre-1958 buildings but additional language should be added to encourage quality preservation rather than pasting old facades on new buildings.

1320.3 (b)

Add: "(12) Grocery store"

This would provide some flexibility to develop a sorely needed neighborhood serving business.

1320.4

HSMS supports restrictions on these commercial uses. The presence of businesses of this type would undermine the pedestrian-friendly environment.

1320.5 (d)

Delete "after the effective date of this section"

The gas station is not pedestrian friendly.

1320.5 (g)

Add: "Automobile parts and accessories"

These businesses do not support a pedestrian-friendly environment.

1321.3

Insert: "New construction that provides for restoration and adaptive reuse of existing buildings constructed before 1958."

This would encourage quality preservation rather than pasting old facades on new buildings.

1321.2

Replace. "0.5 FAR" with "1.0 FAR"

As written, the overlay is so restrictive that it could actually discourage the development of pedestrian-friendly retail.

1322.3

Add: "restoration and adaptive reuse of existing buildings"

As above, this is an attempt to encourage real preservation of the historic fabric

1323.2

Any final language in this section should allow for a mixed use development on the current library site so that a new library could be built with housing above the first floor.

1323.3

Replace: "1.0 FAR" with "1.5 FAR"

This would encourage the development of profitable and pedestrian-friendly retail.

1323.4

Add: "restoration and adaptive reuse of existing buildings"

As in 1321.3, this is an attempt to encourage real preservation of the historic fabric.

1324

HSMS supports these design guidelines as they aim to create a pedestrian-friendly corridor

1324.9

HSMS supports this effort to discourage the use of opaque security grates, which harm the development of the corridor.

Conclusion

The development that occurs as a result of the overlay provides our community with a unique opportunity to improve our neighborhood. We are eager to work together to make this happen.

Thank you for the opportunity to express the opinions of the H Street Main Street organization.

Respectfully,



Anwar Saleem
Chairman, Board of Directors
H Street Main Street

Attachment

"H" Street Main Street

Working with a generous grant from Abdo Development, the Spring 2004 Urban Design Studio, working with the "H" Street Main Street Design Committee and Executive Director, Tim Lewis, and Lauren Adkins of the National Historic Trust for Preservation's Main Street USA program, established 4 goals to be met:

- 1. To develop a design and implementation strategy to increase the density and diversity of the "H" Street corridor sufficiently to support desired retail activity and public transit.**

Recommendations

- Study the feasibility and establish guidelines for the insertion of medium to high density mixed-use development including retail, housing and commercial space.
- Focus initial development on infill sites to reestablish the wall of buildings so identified with the activity and vitality of the pre-1968 retail corridor.
- Do not require, or permit setbacks below the third floor in new development.
- Over time, at least double, or even triple, the existing low-density FAR of 1.5 to 3.0 or 4.5 –and in selected instances even higher might be appropriate
- As density increases so must amenity, therefore a number of possible improvements to the quality of life along the corridor and the surrounding neighborhoods are proposed herein.
- As much diversity as possible must be created in housing stock, economically, typologically and in unit sizes.

- 2. To equalize and balance *all* modes of transportation on "H" Street: pedestrian; public transit; automobile traffic including local, service and through modes.**

Recommendations

- Maintain existing commuter demand by dedicating lanes either west in the morning and east in the evening
- To better utilize "K" Street to relieve through traffic on "H" Street.
- Create an "asymmetrical" street offering a different amenity to each side: a dedicated transit lane on the shadowed south side, and a widened sidewalk to create a "paseo" on the sunny north side to accommodate cafes and retail displays.
- Return those streets closed to accommodate 1960's urban renewal super blocks, such as Hechingers and the shopping strip at 9th street, to the District grid.
- Insert a public park such as Lincoln or Stanton Park to terminate the eastern end of the "H" Street corridor while easing the existing chaos of the 6 point intersection of Bladensburg and Benning Roads, Maryland and Florida Avenues and "H" and 15th Streets.
- Where possible, insert new alleys mid-block to service new mixed use buildings on "H" Street and to permit residential owners to develop alley housing units.

3. To better integrate "H" Street with adjacent neighborhoods and use it's redevelopment as a catalyst to strengthen a sense of community.

Recommendations

- Develop a series of "ribs" off the "H" Street "backbone" by utilizing key north-south streets and paths to penetrate into the neighborhoods and link the corridor with surrounding institutions and amenities such as Gallaudet University and Lincoln Park.
- Augment the street grid by inserting a dedicated pedestrian path linking Ludlow Taylor and J.O. Wilson Elementary Schools.
- Utilize and augment existing pedestrian gathering places where the "ribs" join the "backbone of "H" Street. These nodes will help to organize a series of efficient and convenient public transit stops and provide new economic opportunities for locally owned retail activity.

- 4 To search for means by which existing resident property owners might share in—rather than being displaced by—the renaissance of the "H" Street corridor.

Recommendations

- Amend single-family residential zoning to permit individual property owners to build "alley houses".
- Modify current zoning on the "rib" streets: 4th Street; the pedestrian path between 6th and 7th Streets; 8th Street; and 12th Street to encourage local entrepreneurial opportunities such as corner convenience stores and restaurants within existing structures, especially at key intersections such as at "K" Street and Florida Avenue.
- Extend the District's current policy to freeze property taxes of resident property owners over 60 and below a certain income level to all resident owners below the income limit, thereby protecting them from the escalation of property taxes brought on by gentrification.
- Provide small business loans and consultation to foster locally owned businesses.