

Testimony before the Zoning Commission of Washington, DC

Eli Staub
1750 Swann Street NW
Washington, DC 20009
Ward 2
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Ladies and gentlemen of the Zoning Commission, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Eli Staub, and I am a resident of Ward 2. I have lived in Washington DC for 1 year. I am 23 years old. I am also a board member and active volunteer of Jews United for Justice, a local non-profit organization that seeks to organize a visible Jewish presence and take action in local campaigns for social and economic justice in the Greater Washington DC area. It is from all of these perspectives that I wish to speak in favor of the proposal before you from the Campaign for Mandatory Inclusionary Zoning.

Our Jewish tradition places a heavy emphasis on doing acts of *tzedakah*, of righteousness, sometimes translated as charity. We are taught to think of acts of righteousness through the metaphor of a ladder with eight rungs, each rung representing a ranked category of righteous action. For the most part, what differentiates one rung from the one below it is not the quantity of charity given—we are not measured on how much we are able to give relative to other people. Rather, what sets each rung of that ladder apart is qualitative: our acts of righteousness are measured by the dignity they afford to those who receive our aid. At the highest rung of this ladder sits the category of righteousness that is not charity at all. empowerment. Providing a person with the skills, tools, or opportunity to self-actualize is considered the highest form of just action.

It is from this teaching that Jews United for Justice has pledged its support and mobilized the Jewish community throughout this city in favor of a robust Mandatory Inclusionary Zoning policy for the District of Columbia. Providing a struggling family with the opportunity to secure housing at an affordable level empowers that family to live in greater dignity, with less fear, with more hope. MIZ, done ambitiously, holds the promise of providing shelter for three to five thousand DC residents and families at affordable levels. That's three to five thousand households that can breathe easier, that can save for the future, that can dream bigger, that can play active roles in their communities, that can achieve a level of freedom and empowerment impossible without the security of affordable housing. Let their hopes and aspirations guide you as you decide how rigorous you desire a program for mandatory inclusionary zoning to be.

Our tradition teaches more than how to act righteously as individuals—it provides clear guidelines for how to create communities that treat each member as if they were a human being of infinite value. We are inspired by the prophet Isaiah, who entreats us to “let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke... to share [our] bread with the hungry, and to take the poor into [our] homes.” And we given a simple command by Rabbi Hillel: *al tifrosh min hatzibur*-- do not separate yourself from the community. We in Jews United

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for Justice believe that we have deep responsibilities to those with whom we share space and resources, and we cannot ignore the troubling economic dynamics that are pushing our teachers and firefighters, police and nurses, office and service and construction and so many other workers further and further away from the communities that they serve every day. We cannot separate ourselves from those in our DC community who build, clean, care for, and ensure the safety of our city. Rather, we must take them into our homes—and in this moment, that means ensuring that when we build new apartments and condos, we make affordability a priority in such a way that we bring these members of our community into our buildings and treat them with the respect and honor that they deserve.

JUFJ has found that the values I speak of have deep resonance for our members, as seen by the strong approval they have demonstrated for Mandatory Inclusionary Zoning, notably in Wards 2, 3, and 4. We also have found tremendous support from the Jewish community in DC for Mandatory Inclusionary Zoning over the last 9 months. 16 Rabbis, representing different denominations, neighborhoods and Jewish traditions, signed an interfaith statement of support. Congregational social action committees have rallied behind this proposal through jointly-planned events as well. All of this affirms our Jewish commitment to building a fairer and more inclusive city.

This is why we from Jews United for Justice implore you today to choose the most robust and ambitious inclusionary zoning program possible—because each of those units of shelter empowers those who will be able to turn their energies to more ambitious pursuits rather than worry if they will be forced out of their neighborhoods by rising housing costs. I, and Jews United for Justice across the District of Columbia, hope for a city that lives up to our highest ideals of inclusion and opportunity for all.

Thank you