



Testimony by
the Sierra Club, Washington, D.C. Chapter to
the D.C. Zoning Commission regarding:

Case No. 04-33

Inclusionary Zoning

In Support of the Campaign for Mandatory Inclusionary Zoning's Proposal

July 28, 2005

Good evening, and thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Dan Emerine, and I live at 3723 Oakview Terrace, NE, in Brookland. I have been a resident of the District for six years.

I am here today to testify on behalf of the Sierra Club, in support of the Campaign for Mandatory Inclusionary Zoning's (CMIZ) proposal for inclusionary zoning (IZ) in the District of Columbia. The Sierra Club is the nation's largest grassroots environmental organization, with 300,000 members in the U.S. and more than 3,000 members in the District. I am here today to represent the Club's Washington, D.C. chapter.

As I said, the Sierra Club is an environmental organization. So why are we speaking up about an affordable housing policy? Simply this: inclusionary zoning makes good environmental sense for the District and for the Washington region. Inclusionary zoning will keep affordable housing in the District, instead of forcing working families to search for homes in the suburbs. Every time a teacher, construction worker, or firefighter is forced to live outside the city because they are unable to find housing in their price range, it puts more cars on the region's roads, both congesting the highways and polluting the air. The Washington, D.C. metropolitan area currently does not meet federal standards for healthy air. By providing families with the opportunity to live closer to their places of work, we can help reduce vehicle emissions that harm our health. Finally, increasing the supply of affordable housing in the District—the heart of our metropolitan region—decreases the pressure to build new housing on the fringe. Scientists have identified the low-density sprawling patterns of development as a major threat to the health of our streams and rivers, and to the Chesapeake Bay. By encouraging new affordable housing in the District, we can play a stronger part in reversing this harmful trend.

The CMIZ proposal is particularly effective at mitigating the effects of sprawl and providing people with transportation options, because many of the newly-built affordable homes will be built in pedestrian-friendly locations near our Metrorail stations. The Metrorail system represents an investment of more than 10 billion dollars by the people of this region, and it would be wise to use it effectively. By encouraging new development to take place near our Metrorail stations, we provide people with the opportunity to take care of their daily needs, get to work, shop, visit with neighbors, and play without ever having to get into a car. Many of our Metrorail stations are

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EXHIBIT NO. 88

EXHIBIT NO. 88

already situated in neighborhoods with walkable, bikeable streets with convenient Metrobus access, providing even more options. For those stations currently underserved by such high-quality infrastructure, the increased activity encouraged by an IZ policy could provide the impetus for neighborhood improvements. It should be noted, by the way, that the density bonuses provided to developers under this proposal—which we view as fair compensation for their participation in making the city more affordable—are entirely consistent with the comprehensive plan. As we encourage a greater diversity of housing in our neighborhoods, we will generate more economic activity for local businesses, helping the city to become the vibrant, livable place envisioned in our city's plan.

I would like to emphasize that the Sierra Club is in full support of the CMIZ's proposal for inclusionary zoning. We appreciate the efforts of the Office of Planning to come up with an alternate proposal for the commission and the public to consider. However, we believe that the CMIZ's proposal is a more workable solution for the District. It is easier to administer, fairer to developers, and will provide more affordable units at a deeper level of affordability to the people who need it the most. For example, the Office of Planning proposal suggests that the number of affordable units set aside be based on a formula linked to the square footage of the market units. This would be difficult to administer, difficult to ensure compliance, and potentially produce fewer units for which there is the greatest need (i.e., efficiencies and one-bedrooms). The CMIZ proposal, in contrast, is based on a simple percentage of the number of market-rate units.

We are also concerned that the IZ policy adopted by the zoning commission should reach the greatest level of financial need achievable. The CMIZ proposal does this admirably, by setting aside 50% of the affordable units for households making 50% of the Area Median Income (AMI), and the remaining 50% for households making 80% of AMI.

The CMIZ proposal also requires construction of the affordable units on-site. This is critically important to creating mixed-income communities. Mixed-income communities are healthier, more socially just, and help us to maintain the kind of diverse neighborhoods we are so proud of in this city.

I will end by saying that the CMIZ proposal is notable for its careful crafting, based on sound policy rationale and on research conducted in the dozens of communities across the U.S. that have adopted IZ policies. The CMIZ proposal draws lessons from the experiences of these communities, including one of the national trailblazers in this area, Montgomery County, Maryland. We have nearly three decades of experience to draw from, and it would be tragic if the District failed to take advantage of that wealth of information. The CMIZ proposal gives the District of Columbia an opportunity to become a national leader in adopting leading-edge affordable housing policy, befitting our place as the nation's capital. The Sierra Club strongly endorses the Campaign's inclusionary zoning proposal as an important part of the city's efforts to create affordable, diverse, vibrant neighborhoods. We support this proposal, not only for the benefits it will bring to working families in the District, but also for the benefits it will bring to all of us, through reduced driving, increased transit use, and restoring the core of our region.

Thank you for your consideration of these remarks.