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Testimony of Councilmember Tommy Wells

Zoning Commission
July 31, 2008

Support for Case No. 08-06-2 (Comprehensive Zoning Regulations Rewrite: Parking)

Good Evening Chairman Hood and members of the Zoning Commission. Thank you for holding this important roundtable about the District's zoning regulations as they relate to parking requirements. The updating of the zoning code is a laudable and Herculean task. I would like to thank the Commission for your leadership in overseeing this process which I know will be lengthy, educational, and fruitful.

Parking is a hot button issue all over the City, and this discussion about how to set the rules governing parking is timely. The development boom in the District continues and my Ward is no different. I am told 50% of all the development over the next 10 years is located in Ward 6. In fact the SE-SW neighborhoods just south of Capitol Hill alone will see about 10,000 new residents and about 20,000-25,000 new jobs.

I have enjoyed working closely with community members and developers in making sure that projects contribute toward a highly walkable, multi-modal, mixed use community experience for current and future residents, workers, and visitors. But, I am keenly aware that we must proceed very thoughtfully if we are to get the results we want – especially when it comes to the balance of transportation modes. In many ways parking is the lynchpin issue that has cascading effects on all other aspects of quality of life. If very high proportions of new households will require multiple cars, what will that do the goal for more walkable, transit-oriented communities throughout the City? On the other hand, if we proactively balance the transportation modes, how will that serve neighborhoods and people?

The Office of Planning has presented a visionary set of recommendations to update and modernize the parking regulations. The recommendations cover many areas, but I urge adoption of the following specific recommendations:

1) Eliminate Minimums, Install Maximums

I strongly support removing parking minimums from the code and letting market conditions drive what the minimum number should be. I also strongly support placing maximums to make sure parking is not overbuilt in those areas where the City has invested millions of tax dollars to provide multi-modal transportation choices.

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Predetermining how much minimum parking is appropriate without consideration of market trends and other local conditions such as other transportation choices is not ideal. It distorts the actual market demand for parking, and this has negative effects on the effort to mitigate the ill-effects of car domination. Removing minimums does not remove the right to build parking, but merely allows the decision of how much to build to be made in real time based on current demand trends. Observations and demographic data tell us that DC has seen a rise in population in the last few years, and the new residents are coming back for the best of urban living. That includes living in a place where they can walk to a local restaurant, bike to work, have easy access to transit and a Zipcar. People want these choices which are not easily available in the suburbs. They are willing to trade in their cars to get this quality of life. Rising gas prices also add to this willingness to choose other modes. The severe excess of parking at DCUSA tells us that these decisions must be made carefully and based on real-time market conditions.

2) Promote Car Sharing and Shared Parking

Allowing the minimum parking requirements to be met by spaces that are shared among multiple uses or destinations is another important reform. Too often, we fail to capitalize on the parking inventory we have. In a mixed use community, it makes all the sense in the world for an office that doesn't require many spaces in the evening to share parking with area restaurants whose need goes up during dinner hours. The code should allow and even encourage such flexibility. Otherwise, we leave parking capacity on the table.

The benefits of car sharing are so manifold it is amazing. Today the Metro DC area has hundreds and hundreds of shared cars. On average, each shared car takes 15 private cars off the roads. Let me repeat that once more: 1 shared car takes 15 private cars off the roads. These are cars which households who become carsharing members give up because they don't need their own anymore. I strongly support requiring some number of spaces be made available to car sharing in buildings that have greater than 50 parking spaces. Car sharing is a real public amenity that effectively meets the goal of reducing car ownership and allowing for more walkable neighborhoods.

3) Require Bike Parking

Introduction of bike parking regulations into the zoning code is a true marker that we are modernizing a code that has not been opening since the 1950's. I am very happy to see that bike parking is included OP's recommendations.

However, I was very disappointed to see that OP only recommends 1 class A bike parking space per classroom for grade schools. This is too low and fails to recognize the City's Safe Routes to School initiative which aims to make it safe to walk and bike to grade schools around the City. In fact the first schools that will be assessed and improved for safe routes will be announced in the next couple of days.

I strongly urge the Commission to improve this low requirement. The Zoning Code and City initiatives should reinforce each other. For some unclear reason, the OP recommendations have missed that opportunity here. *I recommend the class A bike parking recommendation be changed to at least 3 spaces per classroom for all grade school levels.*