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Comments on proposed parking zoning regulations

July 8, 2008

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The off-street parking regulations proposed by the Office of Planning are straightforward, common-sense, and long overdue reforms of a 50-year-old zoning code far out of touch with the needs of contemporary Washington, DC. The proposals relax harmful over-regulation that forces unnecessary parking on neighborhoods that don't want it, drives up the price of housing, and forces a suburban land-use pattern on urban centers in our city.

The Zoning Commission should approve the parking regulations as proposed by the Office of Planning. Their carefully thought-out draft brings a proven and successful approach to parking policy to a city that will greatly benefit from it.

The proposed parking regulations are consistent with best practices from other cities and appropriately tailored to the unique characteristics of the District of Columbia.

Opponents argue that DC should not adopt the draft because many cities listed in the Nelson\Nygaard report, such as Milwaukee, Seattle, Pasadena, Portland, and San Francisco, reduced parking requirements in targeted downtown districts rather than citywide. But those cities listed in the report have had remarkable success with parking policies just like those in this proposal. Just because other cities have not implemented the changes citywide does not mean they are a bad idea, or even that the cities in question had any clear reasons for limiting parking. In fact, the United Kingdom eliminated its parking minimums across the entire nation.

DC will not be alone. San Francisco is moving toward broader elimination of minimums. Its Market and Octavia plan turned minimums into maximums in several new neighborhoods in April, and last November, San Francisco voters overwhelmingly rejected a measure to restore minimums across the city. Elimination of minimums citywide is the logical conclusion of San Francisco's current path.

Besides, the District of Columbia is different from Portland, Milwaukee, and all the others. It has a vastly superior rail transit system, a comprehensive bus network, and the second highest percentage in the United States of commuters who get to work without driving. Every resident has alternatives to driving. Not all will choose those alternatives, and we should not force them to. But artificially mandating land for car storage, whether or not market conditions warrant it, is foolish.

In particular, it is the public policy of DC, and a tenet of the Comprehensive Plan, to encourage non-automobile use in areas adjacent to Metrorail stations. We have made multibillion-dollar

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 CASE NO. 08-06-2
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capital investments in our rail infrastructure. Parking requirements undermine that investment by forcing—not just permitting, but forcing—market conditions that subsidize driving.

DC's historic districts are examples of successful residential neighborhoods without minimums.

We need not look west to Seattle or Pasadena for examples of successful urban areas without minimum parking requirements. Nor need we look north, or south. We have examples right here in our historic neighborhoods, such as Georgetown, Dupont Circle, Logan Circle, U Street, and Capitol Hill.

These neighborhoods have not only thrived, but have become DC's most desirable. If a neighborhood without parking minimums is so "radical," why do we have so many successful examples of just that, right here?

Furthermore, while these neighborhoods were originally built before minimum parking requirements, our 1958 zoning is gradually nibbling away at their historic fabric by forcing infill with surface parking or driveway curb cuts that are incompatible with the existing historic character.

Our outlying and historically less fortunate rowhouse neighborhoods and areas now being redeveloped deserve to share the walkable characteristics of the historic neighborhoods. But we can't achieve that with the current parking requirements. The draft regulations would enable future development of walkable neighborhoods with a strong sense of community and convenient neighborhood retail.

Removing minimums will lead to, at most, gradual and incremental change.

If the new zoning code removes parking requirements, the existing parking in the District of Columbia will not suddenly go up in smoke. Developers will continue to build parking in new projects. Even today, many build more parking than regulations require. In many cases, market conditions justify parking, and developers will provide it.

We do not force new apartment buildings to provide cable television or Internet access, yet all new buildings contain wiring for them. Our zoning code does not require washers and dryers, yet all new buildings contain laundry in units or in basement rooms. When we require parking, we are preordaining the market decision, forcing people to buy the parking with their apartments and driving up costs.

More often, developers overestimate demand for parking, or the zoning code forces construction of too much. The Highland Park Apartments in Columbia Heights contains more than one parking space per unit. But so far, only one in ten new residents have purchased parking spaces, creating a glut of excess capacity. Across the street, the DC USA commercial development got a zoning variance to lower its required parking from 1,600 spaces to 1,000;

nevertheless, an entire level of the garage has still never been used, and the level is radically underutilized.

Our zoning code's one-size-fits-all parking minimums often radically overprescribe parking. At the Washington Hilton, which is currently planning a condo tower addition, the Adams Morgan ANC (ANC 1C) passed a resolution endorsing less new parking than zoning ordinarily requires. On Capitol Hill, both a developer and the surrounding community want a drive-through KFC replaced with a building that fully connects the streetwall on both frontages of its corner lot; the only obstacle is our parking requirements, which would force an unsightly surface parking lot on a corner parcel steps away from a Metro station.

On-street management is the right tool to handle spillover.

The only difference between parking and other amenities like cable and laundry is the concern about "spillover." As experiences from other cities in the Nelson\Nygaard report prove, the best policy is effective on-street management. The specific solutions recommended in that report may or may not be the perfect fit for DC, but the overall approach is sound and thoroughly tested elsewhere.

DC is already refining an appropriate mix of on-street management techniques for our city through the pilot programs in Columbia Heights and around the Nationals ballpark. Around the ballpark, the pilot has accomplished its goal. DC built a major traffic attractor and provided vastly less parking than 1950s zoning code writers believed possible, less than most other cities who have built new stadiums, and yet we have experienced no major problems. ANC 6D, the ANC in that area, even passed a resolution last month supporting the performance parking system and asking DDOT to keep it in force.

The news media have reported some minor issues with the pilots, and those are being solved. On-street management gives us a wide range of tools; in time we will perfect a system that can work in every neighborhood where conditions warrant. No city that has tried performance parking has failed to reap significant rewards.

Our zoning code will last for another fifty years. We will identify the best on-street management systems within one or two, well in advance of potential new development with slightly reduced parking. We should not enshrine bad practices in zoning for half a century because of uncertainty about a system that already works here and is so successful in other cities.

Car-sharing requirements are an appropriate and valuable component of the zoning regulations.

Car sharing provides a key piece of the puzzle to give residents a real choice between car ownership and not. Anyone should be free to own a car, but we should also ensure that adequate alternatives exist for the 37% of DC households who do not own cars, including those

who choose not to own cars. 20% of new car-sharing customers even give up their cars when switching, and each shared car takes five other cars off the road and out of parking spaces. Finally, many developers are already choosing to include car-sharing in their developments, proving that the economic benefit is usually if not always positive, and this rule is no great burden.

A requirement to provide car-sharing spaces in large garages no more subsidizes a company than plumbing requirements subsidize plumbing companies. Any company can choose to provide a car-sharing service; there is only one operating in DC right now, but there were two until recently, and in the future, if market conditions make a second potentially profitable, there will be again. Meanwhile, Philadelphia and San Francisco both have car-sharing nonprofits, and in San Francisco the nonprofit City CarShare competes with the for-profit Zipcar.

A small (and this requirement is very small) car-sharing requirement will lower housing costs by decreasing car ownership rates, lower Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) saving money on road repair and improving our air, and make the parking minimums even more clearly unnecessary.

Additional comments on proposed parking zoning regulations August 28, 2008

Based on the testimony of opponents at the July 31 hearing, a casual observer might conclude that the Office of Planning recommends completely removing all off-street parking in the District of Columbia. Or, perhaps the Office of Planning is attempting to outlaw construction of any new off-street parking.

As you well know, this is not true.

There is an enormous distinction between relaxing parking minimums and actually eliminating parking. Most projects built in DC today have more parking than current regulations require. If we remove minimum requirements, that will not stop developers from building parking when appropriate. It will, however, enable projects to eliminate unnecessary parking.

Consider the recent projects constructed along the Georgetown waterfront. In her testimony on July 31, Barbara Zartman of the Committee of 100 used this as an example of the need to maintain parking requirements. Yet, upon closer examination of the three largest recent projects, none built the minimum parking.

3303 Water Street has 72 residential units in a W zone (all three fall under W zoning). Current rules call for 24 spaces (1 per 3 apartments); the building has 140 spaces, or almost six times the requirement.

Incinerator Building: Now the Ritz-Carlton, the Residences on South Street, and the movie theater. Current zoning requires 1 space per 3 residential units, 1 per 2 hotel rooms, one for each 150 square feet of the largest function room, and 1 per 10 theater seats. There are 28 condos, 86 hotel rooms, and 2,900 theater seats. I don't have the precise figures for the Ritz's

largest function room, but their Web site claims 952 square feet of meeting space. If we assume that's all in a single room, then the building would need 349 spaces under the current rules. It has 575.

Washington Harbour: This has 35 condos and 117,409 square feet of commercial space. Zoning requires 1 space per 3 units and one for each 1,800 commercial square feet beyond the first 2,000, for a total of 76 required spaces. They built 100.

In short, our parking minimums had no impact on these projects. Clearly, they built parking based on their own estimates of demand, not based on the rules. If we had taken away the minimum years ago, they still would have built the same amount of parking. Meanwhile, there are projects where these minimums do force parking—and in those cases, it usually turns out to be excessive. DC USA in Columbia Heights, for example, got a variance to reduce their parking from 1,400 spaces to 1,000, and yet a whole level of the garage is completely unused.

Georgetown's waterfront projects were probably right to build some parking. But we didn't need zoning laws to make them do so. Maybe one day we will have a Metro station in Georgetown, and suddenly fewer people will drive to Washington Harbour or the movie theater. If one of those projects is subsequently renovated, or a new project built nearby, and the existing garages are no longer being fully utilized, shouldn't they be able to build the amount of parking that people would actually use, instead of an arbitrarily imposed minimum?

FAX

From: alpert@cosmopolity.org

To: Sharon Schellin, DC Office of Zoning@12027276072

Fax Subject: Testimony_for_case_08-06-2,_off-street_parking_regulations

Dear Ms. Schellin,

Enclosed is my testimony in support of the Office of Planning's proposed regulations for off-street parking, case number 08-06-2. I have included my original testimony submitted on July 8th as well as additional comments. Please forward these comments to the members of the Zoning Commission and include them in the record for the July 31 hearing.

Thank you,
David Alpert
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