

**Zoning Commission Hearing
Thursday, September 18, 2008
Comprehensive Zoning Regulations Rewrite: Arts & Culture
Case No. 08-06-4**

**Testimony by
Faith Wheeler
October 10, 2008**

Thank you, Chairman Hood and other Commissioners, for holding the September 18 hearing at which I testified orally. Some of the arts venues and businesses in Takoma DC, both current and potential, are in the Single Member District which I represent as Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner. Others are in other parts of the Takoma community where I have lived for 30 years.

Following are additional comments, this time in writing.

Office of Planning goals:

First of all, I heartily support the stated Office of Planning goals: emphasizing "the arts as a means toward economic and community development through the creation of jobs, attraction of tourism dollars and the expression of community identity and values". Also OP's two main methods of achieving those goals: "increasing the geographic distribution of arts in the city and making it more affordable for artists to practice their craft" fit well with our interests in creating an arts district in Takoma.

Zoning guidelines and implementation measures:

It is important that zoning guidelines and implementation measures be carefully and thoughtfully developed in order to be successful. Whatever construction is done will be with us for decades to come and will strongly contribute to further shaping the corresponding communities. I come from a city – Worcester, Massachusetts – where, in the 1960's, poor decisions were made about demolition and construction as well as transportation. For some time since then, much of the center of the city has been a mere shell of what it once was, and it feels quite dead.

It is essential to fashion zoning guidelines for construction and use in such a way that the character of the corresponding communities shines through, thereby enhancing community identity and values and strengthening inter-connections and relationships for residents.

Arts District template:

I understand and applaud your intention to simplify the regulations and design requirements. However, it is important to protect and enhance "community identity and values" as expressed in part by spatial arrangement and use of the built and natural environment. I fully support flexibility and respect for community character, and NOT rigid adherence to a template.

ZONING COMMISSION
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EXHIBIT NO. 14

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The meaning of the phrase, “stand-alone arts districts” is not at all clear to me, nor is the distinction between it and “arts overlays”.

Criteria for Creating an Arts District:

It is important to develop and, at the appropriate time, publicly announce clear criteria, application and selection procedures, including timetables and contact information.

Creating an Arts District in Takoma:

I can't think of a more appropriate place than Takoma to create an arts district. We have the Takoma Theatre, which is a contributing building to our Takoma Park Historic District and the only theatre designed by John Jacob Zink whose interior as well as exterior is still intact. (As you know, the Takoma Theatre Conservancy is working on purchasing that building to then revive it as a cultural arts and education center.) Placido Domingo's Washington Opera rehearses here. Asalom, a cooperative of artists has studio and gallery space. In addition, several visual and ceramic artists, musicians and dancers as well as actors and jewelry designers live and work here and in our neighboring historic community of Takoma Park, Maryland.

Relationship between an Arts District and an Historic District:

It is important to protect the integrity of an historic district and its buildings when introducing an arts district in the same area. This is the case of the Takoma Park Historic District and its contributing buildings such as the Takoma Theatre.

Incentives:

I would offer a word of caution about providing FAR bonuses for performing arts uses.

The measurement, “FAR”, should be used with great care as it is a poor predictor of physical form and does little, in and of itself, to ensure the enhancement of neighborhood character.

Perhaps other parameters or incentives might be considered in addition to FAR that would encourage and permit creating or expanding arts uses while still honoring the character of a community and attending to its energy conservation needs.

Building mass on the property line:

On September 18, I expressed concern about bringing building mass to the property line in reference to OP's No. 9, Establish Primary Street design and use requirements.” It would be inappropriate to apply such a requirement in historic districts where nearly all of the old buildings are gracefully set back from the street – and quite possibly from the property line, too. Takoma is such an historic district. That said, it is important to honor the character and visual cadence of a community.

The Takoma Overlay was billed as an attempt to do that, but it fell significantly short. Its shortcomings are now apparent as at least one of the parameters is now translated from the printed page to brick, mortar and cement: that of a minimum 13' setback from the curblin to the street wall of new buildings. A building set only 13' back feels very close

to the sidewalk, very squeezed, and does not ensure pedestrian mobility, vibrant neighborhoods nor pedestrian safety. These are stated objectives in OP's recommendation for No. 9. "Establish Primary Street design and use requirements". A 13' setback is not wide enough to "help create an active pedestrian environment and vibrant neighborhoods". It would seem that at least a 15' setback would contribute to creating a "walkable community".

Minimum ground floor floor-to-ceiling height in Arts Districts:

I appreciate the leeway provided in OP's recommendation for a "required" 14' first floor ceiling height. Given the ever more pressing need to conserve energy and the financial stress now on nearly everyone, including businesses, it might behoove the Commission to reconsider this to be at most a recommendation and not a requirement. Or you might consider reducing the recommended height to 12'. What's the value of a 14' ceiling height for new construction?

Arts Uses and complementary businesses:

It is important to promote complementary businesses in an Arts District which will help support each other and facilitate and sustain their mutual success. This may require some skillful analysis and guidelines. How does a community attract complementary businesses to privately owned sites?

I appreciate your efforts to encourage arts and culture in the communities of Washington DC and look forward to the day when Takoma becomes an Arts District.

Thank you,

Faith Wheeler
Commissioner, ANC 4B02
Takoma

FAX

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Date: October 10, 2008

To: Zoning Commission
Washington, DC
Fax No. 202-727-6072

From: Faith Wheeler
Commissioner, ANC 4B02
Takoma
Fax No. 202-882-7565

Subject: Case No. 08-06-4
Comprehensive Zoning Regulations Rewrite: Arts & Culture

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Dear Sharon Schellin,

Please include this additional testimony in the record for Case No. 08-06-4.

Thank you very much,



Faith Wheeler