

COALITION FOR SMARTER GROWTH

April 9, 2009

Mr. Anthony Hood, Chairman
Zoning Commission of the District of Columbia
One Judiciary Square
441 4th Street NW, Suite 210 South
Washington, DC 20001

RE: SUPPORT for Case No. 08-06-8: Office of Planning -- ZRR: Low & Moderate Density Requirements

Dear Chairman Hood and members of the Commission:

Please accept these comments on behalf of the Coalition for Smarter Growth, a regional organization based in the District of Columbia focused on ensuring transportation and development decisions are made with genuine community involvement and accommodate growth while revitalizing communities, providing more housing and travel choices, and conserving our natural and historic areas.

I participated in the work group and was impressed by the detailed and thoughtful analysis done by the staff. I believe that the analysis finally demonstrated in very clear images and terms that the 1958 zoning code is the wrong one for our city and undermines the historic building, lot and block patterns. I am gratified that Office of Planning, through its careful analysis has put forth an alternative approach to zoning in order to provide greater clarity, consistency, and most importantly, conservation of the character of low and moderate density neighborhoods.

Customized zoning rather than an arduous overlay process makes sense. For example, working in Downtown Ward 7 (Minnesota Ave. & Benning Road) with local groups, we proposed a pedestrian overlay for the business district but were not supported by Office of Planning because it wanted to avoid creating new overlays. If we can correct some of the underlying flaws of zoning, which leave historic community character subject to changes that degrade the existing qualities of block – such as permitting additional curb cuts, surface parking between buildings and the street, no consistency of a streetwall, an overlay may not be needed. This can also offer greater equity. An easier process with readily transferable elements could allow for neighborhoods throughout the city to benefit. I'd like to suggest that one of the first places we start customizing these zones is Downtown Ward 7.

The recommendations proposed generally make sense. I'd like to comment specifically on a few of them.

3. Front Yards: Defining front yards is an important tool to conserve existing character. The approach of a minimum and maximum setback is helpful. Our city has examples of newer buildings that are totally inconsistent with the existing streetwall of the block. This is an important change to help prevent inappropriate setbacks.

ZONING COMMISSION

CASE No. 08-06-8

EXHIBIT No. 16

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CASE NO.08-06-8
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4. Side Yards – I agree with this recommendation. The idea is to set a side yard standard relative to the existing context, rather than use arbitrary standards regardless of context.

6. Building Area (Lot Occupancy) – These recommendations make sense. As someone who lives in a completely non-conforming 100 year old rowhouse that looks perfectly appropriate for the block, I welcome this approach. My house is a typical size for the block, but sits towards the end of the block where the street tapers to a rounded point. Thus each house moving west has less lot – and more lot occupancy. From the front, all the houses are about the same size on the street and fit the context. From the back, some neighbors have no yard and some have good sized yards. These recommendations correct a problem imposed since 1958.

7. Rear Yards/Building Depth for Row Dwellings – Again the street layouts create tapering blocks that shrink lot sizes as they come to a point. This means that buildings appropriate to their front context have different rear yard setbacks. The required setback for my 100 year old rowhouse is somewhere in the middle of my house. This is an important and needed change.

10. Permitted Uses.

Recommendation 10.

We welcome clarification of how to treat a non-residential uses in residential zones. This recommendation helps preserve neighborhood character and enhance walkability and convenience. An example in my neighborhood is a corner store that was closed for renovation and has not reopened for a few years. Now I fear the use will go away. Regarding home occupations – we should ensure that the activity is a good neighbor, but we don't need to specify exactly what it is except some potentially noxious or disturbing uses such as keeping more than 4 or 5 dogs.

11. Accessory Buildings – It's high time we recognized the importance of accessory buildings to our neighborhood fabric.

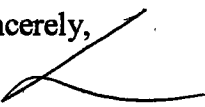
12. Non-Residential uses of Historic Institutional Buildings – this makes sense.

Recommendations 13 – We support allowing second residential structures on the same lot in zones where two or more units are allowed.

One concern that remains, and is not revisited by OP, is the question of the use of floor area (FAR) ratio as a controlling measure. FAR is a dimensionless measurement – it doesn't tell you anything about the quality of the building or how it relates to space. The intensity of use can be controlled by restricting the number of units. It's better to regulate how tall, how wide, how setback or set forward a building can be. These are the tools that we need to guide neighborhood-sensitive development, not FAR. FAR is arbitrary and doesn't produce any measure of quality of how the building relates to the context.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Cheryl Cort
Policy Director