



Coalition for Smarter Growth

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Testimony before the D.C. Zoning Commission
regarding:

Support for Zoning Commission Case No. 08-06A Subtitle D
1606: Accessory Apartments & 1106: Corner Stores

By Cheryl Cort, Policy Director
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Please accept these comments on behalf of the Coalition for Smarter Growth. The Coalition for Smarter Growth is the leading organization in the Washington, D.C. region dedicated to making the case for smart growth. Our mission is to promote walkable, inclusive, and transit-oriented communities, and the land use and transportation policies and investments needed to make those communities flourish.

Again we thank the Zoning Commission, Office of Zoning, and Office of Planning for your extensive outreach and patience on carefully moving through this major overhaul of the 1958 zoning code – a process that began in 2007. We appreciate how available the draft documents have been on OP & ZC websites since summer, and the many presentations, factsheets and blog posts that OP has provided, along with the hundreds of public outreach meetings. After five years, we need to complete this task and move on to other needs. We are gratified that though this proposal has many, many compromises in it due to extensive public engagement, we believe that it achieves the essential objectives of creating a revised zoning code that makes our city more walkable, sustainable, affordable, and a code that is more understandable.

1606: Accessory Apartment Conditions

We wish to express our support for these provisions to allow an accessory apartment as a matter of right. We agree with the standards set out by the section, although we question the 24 foot alley requirement. Twenty-four feet is wider than some streets. Such a wide standard is likely to disqualify many existing accessory units in historic neighborhoods. We know that 20 feet is a more standard width for clearance for fire vehicles with outriggers, but narrower widths could also be considered acceptable by fire code standards. A 24 foot alley could engender another safety problem: speeding. We ask the Commission to reassess and reduce the excessive alley width stated in this section.

Current rules discourage the creation of accessory apartments that are perfectly compatible with existing neighborhoods. We applaud the proposed rules change to encourage legal accessory units in lower density residential neighborhoods. Accessory units can help address the city's tremendous affordable housing shortfall, help homeowners, and create a safer and more vibrant community.

Encouraging accessory dwelling units, provided through conversion of a secondary structure or inside an owner-occupied home, is an important way to improve housing choices. These units can be seamlessly fit into existing neighborhoods, benefiting renters, homeowners, and the neighborhood. Often, homes in older neighborhoods are designed in a way that makes it easy to create a small second unit. Large

basements, old carriage houses, or attics are ripe for such adaptations. Given the decline in the average household size, older homes, built for larger families, offer the potential to house the same number of people in smaller households if separate units are allowed.

We know that this provision has been contested, and the current proposal is a compromise resulting from lengthy discussions with many residents and community organizations. Allowing accessory apartments is a logical progression as we consider the future needs of our city. Most people don't like change, but we are all changing nonetheless. Like it or not, we are all aging. And as we age, we have different housing needs. Accessory apartments provide an opportunity for older homeowners to stay in their larger home that no longer needs to house the children of a family that have grown up and moved away. As retirees seek to stay in their homes on fixed incomes, renting out unneeded space can be an attractive option for earning additional income to help keep up with expenses. Other benefits include companionship, home maintenance, or other personal services in exchange for lower rent. Also, new homebuyers can qualify for a larger mortgage loan based on the income from a legal accessory unit. A homeowner may desire to purchase a larger home with an accessory unit so that the unit can be converted to meet the needs of a growing family in the future.

While some homes currently contain un-permitted accessory units, easing restrictions and encouraging legal units provides greater legal protection to landlords, renters, and the neighborhood. Permitted, inspected units will also be safer. By allowing this use by-right, accessory apartments can provide many benefits resulting from the increased diversity of housing choices in a neighborhood. Easing the process for creating accessory apartments will also help the city address its housing crisis in a low-impact and cost-effective way.

1106: Corner Stores

We wish to express our strong support for the provision to legalize existing corner stores and permit new corner stores to operate under certain conditions. We acknowledge that this provision has been debated extensively across the city and is a compromise. It is highly restrictive in order to provide the benefits of a walkable neighborhood without the negative impacts of commercial activity next to homes. We can support these restrictions – including distance from commercial areas, other establishments, only allowing grocery stores by right, limiting alcohol sales to more than 15% of the floor area, limited hours of operation, no on-site cooking.

I used to live on Brown Street in Mt. Pleasant. At the corner of the block was the Brown Street Market. This is the perfect example of the kind of small neighborhood store where you can go to get some sugar when you run out for your morning coffee. These kinds of stores benefit the neighborhood by offering convenience and walkability. A corner store is the quintessential city convenience – where a rowhouse neighborhood is dense enough to support a small store, simply by the customers who live within walking distance. We ask the Zoning Commission to adopt the provisions to allow corner stores, because it will make our neighborhoods more walkable and convenient.

Thank you for your consideration.