

Zoning Testimony: Accessory Apartments and Corner Stores

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I am a resident of Bloomingdale, I have lived in this city since July 2001, and I would like to be able stay here. That's why I support the Office of Planning's proposals for accessory apartments and corner stores.

1. Accessory Apartments

I support the accessory apartment provisions for the following reasons:

- **Housing affordability for renters.** With DC home prices increases at a rate of 22% a year, it is becoming increasingly untenable for middle class people to stay in this city, or for newcomers to move here. Because it covers such a large area, the accessory unit provision has the potential to provide large numbers of new apartments, with minimal disruption to the look and feel of existing neighborhoods.
- **Housing affordability for homeowners.** With house prices at record levels, the rental income from an accessory unit can make a home affordable to the owner that would otherwise not be.
- **Care for parents while preserving privacy for adult children.** My mother is elderly; she will not be able to live on her own forever. If I could get a house with an accessory unit, she could live near me and my wife, with some privacy for her, but with the ability for us to look in on her. Childcare for future children of ours is another potential benefit. OP's proposals make it far more likely that we'll be able to find a place like that in the city.
- **Neighborhood appearance/security.** Alleys in my neighborhood could be better cared for, and they can provide under-monitored locations for criminals to lurk. If more people lived there, in alley houses and accessory units such as can still be found on Capitol Hill and in Center City Philadelphia, security would improve. Since it's their front door, alley residents would have more incentive to keep the alley clean and pretty.
- **Private outdoor space.** A courtyard between an accessory unit and the main house provides a much more private outdoor space than a long back yard.

Caveats:

- **Coverage.** More and higher density areas, including the city's row house neighborhoods such as Bloomingdale, should be eligible to add accessory units, within the limits of allowable lot coverage.
- **New construction.** People should be allowed to build new accessory units as of right, not by special exception, provide they adhere to lot coverage and height limits. Parking for accessory units should be permitted but optional.

2. Corner Stores

I support more corner stores. DC has too little retail compared to its suburbs and compared to its peer cities, and too little neighborhood-oriented retail especially. High retail rents make for high prices, and retail that is either chain-dominated or excessively upscale for everyday use. Small spaces in buildings that were historically shops will encourage more neighborhood-oriented retail. Existing corner stores should be legalized, and more encouraged to open. More small retail spaces will make for a more affordable, more convenient, and more interesting city. More retail will diversify our job base, and make it more possible to make a living as an entrepreneur, rather than working in one of the many large agencies, firms, and chain stores that dominate our city.

If there is no demand for retail in a given area there is no requirement that it be used as such; it can remain residential. Market prices and preferences of the owner should be allowed to determine the use.

Caveats

- The proposed set of allowed uses is far too narrow, and excludes many important needs, which should be allowed as of right subject to size, space, operational constraints. Specifically:
 - Small restaurants. Philadelphia, New York, even Baltimore have an abundance of tiny, chef-own BYOB restaurants. Some of the best food, and best-value and most creative food in Philadelphia is served in such places. DC has virtually no such restaurants. If more such spaces are made available, it is far more likely that we'll get such establishments.
 - Tiny coffee shops. Ditto.
 - Boutiques and retail stores of all kinds.
 - Taverns. Despite a significant number of bar openings, DC is a tavern desert. More taverns would provide more gathering spaces. Taverns would still be subject to liquor license controls, which are onerous enough.
 - Few people in this town go to bed before 10 p.m. Businesses should be allowed to stay open at least that late.

Thank you.