

Testimony in SUPPORT of Case 08-06A, Subtitle D (Accessory Apartments and/or Corner Stores) by Riordan Frost, 5415 Connecticut Ave NW, Apt 543 Washington, DC 20015

Good evening. My name is Riordan Frost, and I live in the Chevy Chase neighborhood of DC, and I am here to express my strong support for the DC zoning code update. I urge the zoning commission to update this code; doing so will improve the city by making it a more accessible, affordable, and welcoming place. I am a graduate student at American University, where I've received my Masters and am now pursuing a PhD. I live in one of the big apartment buildings along Connecticut Avenue in Chevy Chase, and I enjoy living in that neighborhood, with its short commercial corridor and good transit options (and no, I do not own a car). I love living in DC, and I also value living close to American University.

This is true for young professionals in general, but especially for students at American University (graduate and undergraduate), housing is difficult to find, especially in low-density neighborhoods. The current regulations on accessory dwellings have resulted in a set of options for students like me that aren't ideal for the district or the students. What we do now is either stack up 4-5 people in 1-bedroom apartments, rent out entire houses, or live far away from the university, including outside of the district in car-dependent areas, necessitating another car commuter in the city. The other alternative—one that is frequently chosen and not widely known—is for students and other young professionals to move into accessory dwellings that aren't technically legal, which is a rational move but one that results in people living in non-code-compliant apartments.

Relaxing the strict zoning requirements on accessory dwellings will make low-density neighborhoods like Chevy Chase, AU Park, and the Palisades (among others) more accessible to young professionals and students, who then volunteer in the neighborhood, babysit or rake leaves for neighbors, add more eyes to the street, and overall improve the vitality of these places. There is also a demonstrated need for housing in the district, and more accessory dwellings would help increase supply and reduce cost, making the city more affordable. For people like me, living in a garage or basement apartment is ideal, because it provides a lower-rent option to live close to campus, as well as to be part of the neighborhood (more so than apartment buildings allow). These dwellings also provide a source of income for homeowners who may need it in order to stay in their beloved neighborhoods, whether they are retired or just needing an extra source of income to stabilize themselves (as many federal employees would appreciate).

I am somewhat concerned by the restrictions placed on accessory dwellings in the zoning update, however. The proposed changes are good, but the restriction on non-vehicular uses of accessory dwellings, like a garage with an apartment on the second floor and a workshop or studio or anything other than vehicle storage on the first floor (ch. 6, sub D, 603.1h), is unnecessarily strict. Additionally, the restriction on new or expanded accessory dwellings (ch. 6, sub D, 603.1b) will limit the benefits of this update, and should at least be changed to have a waiting period on new or expanded dwellings, which would enable a family to both expand their garage and add the ability to rent it in the future.

A simplified zoning code with relaxed restrictions for accessory dwellings would be extremely beneficial for DC's old and new residents alike, adding to the vitality of low-density neighborhoods and increasing access to them by those who would really enjoy living there. I urge the Zoning Commission to support this update.