

Testimony of Larry Werner before Zoning Commission 11/19/2013

To paraphrase H.L. Mencken, Washington has a potential parking problem and the Office of Planning has a solution:

NEAT, EASY, and Very, Very WRONG.

OP could not be more wrong in its parking recommendations. We need to INCREASE the off-street parking requirements. Please let me repeat: We need to INCREASE the off-street parking requirements.

Rather than repeat what so many already have said, here are just a few reasons why.

The burden of change is on those who propound it, yet OP has provided lots of faith, belief and hope but almost zero hard, empirical, validated information demonstrating any causal relationship between OP's proposals and the outcomes it claims will occur by dramatically restructuring our City.

It's not just OP; it's almost everything about the relationship of cars and cities. To borrow from reduced parking advocate and urban architect Brian O'Looney: "It's a disaster." Why? "There is no statistical basis for anything. There are no models to figure out how things work."

So, absent actual data, let's look at what we do know.

In very round numbers Washington has 260,000 curbside parking spaces, 285,000 vehicles registered with hundreds of thousands more from commuters, tourists and service vehicles. OP proposes to help the situation by reducing the number of off-street parking spaces and forcing cars onto City streets.

OP expects 200,000 more people to live here in the relatively near future. If only half of them have vehicles, that means we need 100,000 MORE spaces. Where does OP think they'll park?

OP and others expect that much of the population growth will be people deciding to stay in the City as they have children and raise families. But, as the very nice young man who prepares OP's population figures quite rightly noted, people who have families are more likely to have cars. Common sense that's totally absent from OP's proposal would ask where these vehicles will park.

Much of OP's basis for its plan is the assertion that people who live in what used to be called "transit zones" don't have and won't need cars. But – in the real world – the DC Department of Transportation continues to INCREASE the number of on street spaces reserved for the same local residents OP says won't need off street parking – and now says we need them 16 hours a day, seven days a week.

What happens if we allow Matter of Right ADU's and each of the up to five additional residents per ADU has a car? OP says they'll park on the street, as will the possibly five additional cars if each resident has one visitor. Where will they find space?

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Please note, by the way, that in all of these examples, it doesn't matter if the car owners take transit, walk or bike to work or weekend activities if they still have cars they park in our City.

What about the argument that reducing parking requirements will produce "affordable housing"? Interesting idea, but where's the supporting evidence? What's the definition of "affordable"? And who does OP claim actually will benefit if by some change developers volunteer to lower their profits and offer lower cost housing? Singles? Couples? Families with Children? Seniors? Low income?

So, rather than continue with an oft repeated litany of OP's failure to support its argument, what should the Zoning Commission do?

The best option is to return the entire zoning rewrite to the Office of Planning with instructions to include in any future proposals only those items it clearly documents as being in the existing code and in compliance with the existing Comprehensive Plan. IF OP believes changes are needed, it should identify each such change separately, support each such proposal with actual evidence and demonstrate exactly how Washington's citizens have participated in -- and contributed to -- the end product.

The second best option -- at least for parking -- is to increase parking requirements in each and every case that OP has proposed reducing them.

The third best option -- again limited to parking -- would be to retain all existing parking minimums.

Please remember that the problem with compromise solutions is that OP is trying to do through the back door of zoning what it never could get through the front door of electoral politics. This means, to cite just one example, the option of allowing "no parking" in a building but denying any Residential Permit Parking or visitor parking privileges to present or future occupants of isn't on your table. By making reduced parking Matter of Right OP also removes the possibility of incentivizing developers to provide guaranteed affordable housing. There's simply no requirement to share any cost reductions with anyone other than a developer's investors.

We just had our first 2014 Mayoral debate. All six candidates talked about the progress our City has made in the last 20 years -- WITH THE EXISTING ZONING CODE THE OFFICE OF PLANNING SEEKS TO DRAMATICALLY CHANGE.

Please don't choose to be remembered as the five unelected people who made a terrible decision to stop what's been working quite well in favor of a proposal essentially without supporting data.

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