

Written Testimony, Case No. 08-06A
in Support of the Zoning Rewrite Subtitles C and D

TO: D.C. Zoning Commission

Chairman Hood and members of the Zoning Commission:

I am a native Washingtonian, and I have resided for 30 years one block from Connecticut Avenue in Ward 3. I live in a single family house; our household has two cars. I drive, walk and use Metrorail and Metrobus to get around. In response to Chairman Hood's comment at one of the hearings on the proposed zoning rewrite, I definitely consider myself part of the "silent majority" who welcome transit-oriented development and reforms that encourage attractive and walkable urban communities. In my neighborhood, it is definitely those on the other side who are usually the vocal ones.

I write in support of the revisions to the zoning code proposed to reduce minimum parking requirements for new construction in areas where public transit is available and in support of easing approval requirements for certain accessory apartments. My overall rationale is that these revisions are supportive of good urbanism: encouraging walkable neighborhoods, promoting (but not requiring) use of transportation modes other than cars where most feasible, improving the environment by addressing the causes of global warming, promoting less expensive housing alternatives, and growing the tax base.

I wish to associate myself with other testimony in support of these zoning proposals given at hearings by, for example, Ward 3 Vision (Exh. 259, 382), the Coalition for Smarter Growth (Exh. 254, 397), and individuals including (but not limited to) Steven Beller (Exh. 301), Tom Quinn (Exh. 376), Roger Lewis (Exh. 234), and Susan Kimmel (Exh. 252). I will add the following to highlight what I think is most important and give some personal observations.

Parking

Building more parking only encourages driving, exacerbating congestion. Anyone who has experienced the frustration of circling large parking lots at shopping centers looking for a space can attest to this. Where public transport -- in which we have a big investment -- exists, we should be encouraging its use.

Minimum parking requirements for new buildings near transit are unnecessary, and they will not alleviate on-street parking shortages, assuming the latter exist. On Connecticut Avenue, N.W., right now there are two major residential and mixed-use projects being built (nos. 5533 and 4455), and in both the developers are building far more parking than is required by the zoning code. Factors other than zoning obviously drive the decision on how much off-street parking should be built. And just because off-street

parking exists does not mean it will be used. I live on an alley with driveways linking the houses on each side; on the opposite side from me, not one household uses its driveway or garage to park! Apparently – just one block off Connecticut Avenue – residents find it convenient to park on the street. This situation is not uncommon in this upper northwest area.

I am not against driving; in fact, I do so myself, especially when I know I will readily find parking. I do not find that there is a critical shortage of on-street parking here in Ward 3, contrary to what certain groups and individuals regularly claim in opposing all manner of development and reform. I recently broke my foot and had to drive to get around the neighborhood, including to Tenleytown and Van Ness, and I had no problem parking, using commercial parking or on-street parking. In some instances, I had to use metered parking, but I do not regard this as unreasonable in an urban area (and I was able to pay conveniently by calling in after registering my car for this payment method).

Which brings me to a critical point: it is on-street parking regulation that should be used to effectively address parking management, not zoning. But I strongly disagree with those like Councilmember Mary Cheh who say that we should postpone reform of the zoning code until we get parking management reform. This is a recipe for inaction, and to do so would waste all the effort that has gone into this years-long zoning reform process. I would be very surprised if the reduced minimum parking requirements in a revised zoning code had a materially negative effect on on-street parking, but any such effect can be addressed at that time by parking management measures which are appropriate to the actual effect, not some speculation about what might happen. These measures are far more targeted than the blunt instrument of minimum parking zoning requirements. And perhaps residents who have unused driveways and garages will use them for parking, freeing up street parking, if parking regulation encouraged them to do so.

In response to those who argue that unnecessary minimum parking requirements can be addressed by regulatory exemptions on a case-by-case basis, my response is that the current review system delays development to the detriment of the community. Take the Babes Billiards mixed-use building in Tenleytown, which this commission approved to be built without any parking in April 2013, notwithstanding vocal opposition. The building site has been vacant now (at a prime, transit-rich location) for something like eight years, because it took that long for a developer to present a proposal that could win approval, and construction has still not begun. An even more disappointing example is the Akridge mixed-use project approved for Wisconsin Avenue and Jennifer Street, N.W.; the delay in going through the regulatory approval process to get relief from zoning requirements contributed to its demise. Now the neighborhood is getting a Pepco substation.

Finally, it costs a lot to build underground parking, and housing affordability is a big issue in Washington and especially in Ward 3. That is why (among other reasons) I am disappointed that the earlier proposal to discard minimum parking requirements entirely

in transit zones was abandoned. This would have eliminated the need to excavate for parking near transit, a big savings that could be passed on to residents.

The fact is that the minimum parking proposal that emerged from years of hearings and meetings which is before this commission is a very modest reform, and it should be approved.

Accessory Apartments

The rationales in favor of accessory apartments were well laid out in the testimony cited above. What I want to focus on is my conviction that the proposal to ease approval requirements for accessory apartments within a dwelling and within the confines of an existing garage on the owner-occupied property will have the most minimal impact and no adverse effect on neighborhoods. This is so, in part, because the expense and bother of building new conforming accessory dwellings make it is very unlikely that a large number of homeowners will do so because of this regulatory change. And the limitations in the proposal (*e.g.*, only one accessory unit on a property, only six persons living on the property, owner living on the property) will make this even more so.

The vocal opposition to this reform, especially from those in Ward 3, is part-and-parcel of an entrenched, change-adverse attitude on the part of small group here regardless of the merits. This attitude has stymied development that would benefit our neighborhoods by bringing in population to support local amenities and retail, rather than forcing us to travel to Bethesda or Arlington. This proposal on accessory apartments is another such example, and it should be approved.



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