

Testimony before the District of Columbia Zoning Commission

Hearing on the Rewrite of the District's Zoning Ordinance (Zoning Case No. 08-06A)

February 8, 2014

Dunbar High School, Washington, DC

I moved to the District in the spring of 2009 from Greensboro, North Carolina, where I grew up and attended college. While Greensboro offered many amenities and a good quality of life, as one who is concerned about the environment and prefers not to drive for multiple reasons, I was frustrated by the degree to which the ability to fully take advantage of all Greensboro had to offer depended on having a car.

When I accepted a job located near Washington Union Station, I sought to live close enough to work that I could walk or bike there in a half hour or less, and use my bike or public transportation for most other errands and routine travel around town. While this means paying a higher rent than I would have had to living farther out in the suburbs, the amount of money I save on transportation compensates for it. I sold my car, becoming one of the third of DC residents who does not own a motor vehicle, and moved into a shared rowhouse on the south end of Bloomingdale, just five blocks from here. From there, I can easily access three major Metrobus routes--the 80, the P6 and the 90/92--and can walk to the NoMa-Gallaudet U Metrorail station in ten minutes. I am also within three minutes of two Capital Bikeshare stations, and I have Zipcar, Uber, Hailo and Car2go at my disposal. With all of these choices, owning a car would be more of a liability than an asset.

I am worried that the lifestyle I enjoy living within DC's urban core is becoming financially out of reach for too many people, including myself, as home prices and rents continue to rise. I want the District, and our region, to manage inevitable growth in such a way that the vast majority of new and existing residents can have the transportation choices I enjoy. All Washingtonians should be able to live within walking distance of grocery stores, doctors' offices, restaurants, shops, entertainment venues, and all the amenities that make for an enjoyable urban life. That is why my top priorities for the zoning rewrite are to reduce or eliminate off-street parking minimums; to allow for corner stores to open more easily in residential neighborhoods; and to allow homeowners to add accessory dwelling units on their properties.

The increasing cost of housing in the District is perhaps the greatest barrier to ensuring that the city remains diverse and welcoming to people of all backgrounds, professions and income brackets. At the same time, traffic congestion and air pollution caused by over-reliance on the automobile for routine trips continue to plague our region's quality of life. Incentivizing dense housing development within DC's urban core, intermixed with offices and retail, addresses both of these challenges. Making off-street parking minimums for new housing developments as low as possible further disincentivizes reliance on the car—forcing residents to consider the hidden costs of driving—while making these new homes more affordable, as the cost of providing parking is often built in to these units' price or rent. One parking space can add up to \$50,000 to the cost of an apartment or condo. I specifically support the following proposed changes to parking requirements in the zoning code:

- Eliminating parking minimums in downtown
- Halving the parking minimums in areas “well-served by transit,” based on the Office of Planning’s definition of this term
- Requiring spaces be set aside for car-sharing vehicles where 50 or more spaces are mandated, and allowing car-sharing spaces to count towards meeting minimums
- Allowing off-street parking to be shared between multiple uses of a building (residential and commercial)
- Allowing relief from parking minimums by special exception, rather than requiring a variance
- Updated bicycle parking standards and requiring additional bike parking as part of mitigation for projects providing excess parking

Allowing more people to live in existing buildings further reduces the cost of housing. That’s why I strongly support the rewrite of Subtitle D, to allow one accessory unit on owner-occupied properties in single family residential zones as a matter of right. More people will be able to afford to live in existing neighborhoods if they can rent someone’s garage or basement, without the owner having to go through a lengthy review process or meet outdated household staff or family requirements to legally turn these spaces into dwellings.

Finally, more small businesses should have the opportunity to serve their neighbors within residential areas, within walking distance, by opening corner stores (Subtitles D and E). Many of the city’s most beloved small shops predate the 1958 enactment of existing zoning code, and would be illegal to open today. Not only does this open up more affordable space for neighborhood-serving local businesses, it also puts groceries and other

home essentials within walking distance of more homes, reducing peoples' need to drive. Allowing residential and commercial uses to intermix makes the city more vibrant, reduces the distances people have to travel to run errands, and facilitates walking, thus increasing public safety by putting more eyes on the street to deter crime.

I look forward to being able to remain in DC affordably, and to continue to enjoy the variety of amenities that are within an easy walk, bike ride, bus or Metro ride of my home. I am glad that the Office of Planning and the Zoning Commission are finally rewriting an outdated zoning code to make the law compatible with the changing shape of our city and the desires of its residents. Thank you for the opportunity to offer my comments.

Malcolm M. Kenton