

TESTIMONY OF DAVID C. SOBELSOHN
SOUTHWEST WASHINGTON, DC

Hoffman/Madison Waterfront
Planned Unit Development Stage One
Case No. 11-03
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I am David Sobelsohn. I've lived in Southwest for 18 years. Until January I served as an Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner. I still live in Southwest.

Fifty years ago my neighborhood was solid, if run-down. Families had lived there for generations. But federal officials felt embarrassed by a few outhouses so close to the Capitol. And so Southwest DC became the poster child for urban renewal.

Urban renewal made Southwest a nicer place to live. It sharply increased property values. It also forced most residents to move. With the increase in property values, most never came back. They couldn't afford it.

The project before you poses a challenge. Few would argue against redeveloping the waterfront. I admire much in the Hoffman/Madison Waterfront plans. After redevelopment, the waterfront will become a fabulous place to stroll, to work, and to live.

But fabulous for whom? Let's not repeat the mistake we made 50 years ago. In 2011, we once again have a thriving community. We take special pride in our diversity: racial, ethnic, and especially economic. Our neighborhood has multi-billion-dollar condo complexes and section 8 projects. We have roomy townhomes and tiny studios. People of varying economic circumstances live side-by-side.

It's great that the waterfront will include new affordable housing. But new affordable housing attracts mostly outsiders. Southwest will look even more beautiful after waterfront redevelopment. But Southwest redevelopment should benefit Southwest residents, not just hypothetical newcomers.

ZONING COMMISSION
District of Columbia

CASE NO. 11-03
EXHIBIT NO. 73

That's why I've persuaded other Southwest developers to institute a preference, in its affordable housing, for current Southwest residents. Cities from Rhode Island to California have instituted local-resident preferences in affordable housing. These preferences foster a more stable and involved community. They also compensate residents who suffer most during construction. Preferences will let us maintain our diversity with the people who provide that diversity now, my neighbors in Southwest.

Some think my proposal vulnerable under fair-housing laws. To be sure, courts have rightly stopped all-white suburbs from implementing housing preferences for current residents, especially when those suburbs surround racially diverse cities. In effect, those preferences for current residents discriminated against potential minority residents, and were correctly invalidated.

But Southwest Washington is completely different. In the 2010 census, Southwest had nearly the same demographics as the rest of Washington: 30% white (Washington was 36%), 59% black (Washington was 53%), 4% Asian (Washington was 3%). And Maryland or Virginia? There's no comparison.

Far from perpetuating segregation, a Southwest Waterfront housing preference for current residents would preserve the neighborhood's diversity. A local housing preference would also prevent a repeat of the sad, sorry story of urban renewal.

With the good will of Hoffman/Madison Waterfront, I hope we can come to you next with a plan to help Southwest stay Southwest, and that you will approve a plan that includes a preference, in affordable housing, for the people who already live in Southwest. Don't make us move again.