

Zoning Commission Case Number 13-14

Testimony of Katrina Lee & Kevin Garry:

We could write volumes on why Vision McMillan is a bad plan. Undertaken somewhere else it would be, at best, a mediocre plan. But erecting this run-of-the-mill development on a historic site is deplorable. We've all heard the excuse: most of the site must be destroyed in order to save a token piece of it.

We don't believe this is true. Funds can always be generated to accomplish a laudable goal, but it's obvious the District never considered any other outcome. The world contains a huge pool of talented, energetic, and inspired people who could come up with truly impressive alternatives. Out there waiting to be developed is some remarkable way of keeping the site - and its unique and memorable structures - mostly intact while completing the originally-planned park and museum.

This would be truly visionary, unlike the nightmare VMP is touting as "visionary". It would be D.C.'s gift to the world - not just another monument or grand building paid for by US taxpayers, but something distinctive that captures our city's essence. It would be welcoming, soulful, colorful, and a little off-beat; a tribute not just to D.C.'s history and the history of water treatment, but to water itself - the basis of all life. With the world's population growing even as access to clean water evaporates, and with war and aggression over water rights already occurring, what could be more relevant?

But if you approve VMP's ignoble plan, none of this can ever happen. We will have sacrificed not just a wonderful possibility - not just a mysterious, visually striking, one-of-a-kind historic landmark - but also this part of the city's only shot at having a real park. Northwest has Rock Creek Park; Southwest has the Waterfront (sort of, now), and Southeast has the Arboretum. Northeast (or even almost-Northeast) has nothing - just lots and lots of buildings and NoMAs that are mostly housing.

Developers know how to do one thing very well: erect buildings quickly and at the lowest possible cost. They don't know anything about creating neighborhoods. Neighborhoods are grown, not built. They are organic, not processed and shrink-wrapped for instant consumption. They almost always evolve gradually, and individually, which is what makes Brooklyn Brooklyn and what makes the Marigny the Marigny and the Left Bank the Left Bank.

Granted, we live in unusual times. Along with developers, plenty of ordinary citizens got a taste of rapid development during the real estate boom. Instead of changing over decades, maybe generations, whole neighborhoods were transformed within a few years. Seeing it didn't require age and perspective, or leaving and coming back with a new mindset, or viewing it through the eyes of one's children or grandchildren. People watched it actually happen. That made it real, made us think that's how it's supposed to happen, that's how it ALWAYS happens.

But really, none of this matters. There are issues on which people don't get to vote, and this is one of them. If we cannot do right by the McMillan Sand Filtration Site, the proper thing to do, the only RIGHTEOUS thing to do, then, is NOTHING at all.

Yes, it will be hard. At various times, private investors probably floated plans for every historic landmark. If it came up for debate today, in this growth- and profit-oriented era, citizens might approve Paul Revere's Bed and Breakfast or even the Grand Canyon Mixed-Use Housing-Retail Complex. A few years before we were born, no less than 21 private investors were interested in purchasing Ellis Island. The federal government set the price high, at \$6.5 million, and the highest offer was just over \$200 thousand. Thus when Lyndon Johnson came along, we had a monument, and later a museum - an immensely popular one.

Thankfully, up until now, supporting private development with taxpayer money was regarded with suspicion, at best. Though it happened sometimes, especially during the legendary patronage systems, most citizens considered it feeding at the public trough. And thankfully, most citizens also believed they owed something to the future. Sure, every era includes folks who throw up their hands in despair and declare that conjuring up a few temporary construction jobs today is more important than anything else, but today this attitude has become epidemic, effectively blessing projects that past leaders would have recognized as misguided, wasteful, or outright destructive.

Though plenty of people now advocate a wiser, long-term perspective, they usually feel powerless to do anything about it. Beat down at every turn by entrenched interests, individuals whose daily bread depends on rapid and incessant development, and, yes, even bureaucrats, they surrender to cynicism. Declaring, "It's a done deal, we might as well get something out of it," they add their own request to Santa's mismatched, mediocre wish list. THAT is the level this has sunk to.

Perhaps we lack respect for history because we haven't learned its lessons. Advanced technology lets us race along in the material world, but it also compounds our hubris. Everything is a commodity to be bought and sold, anything can be made and remade as long as its profitable. Everything that can be quantified, we think, can be predicted and controlled. Thus we have come to lack humility. We don't think of ourselves as belonging to one generation in a long chain of many; instead we see ourselves as the ONLY generation. Or at least the only one that matters.

We should all be stewards; your function is to step in when we forget that responsibility. When we act like spoiled, arrogant children, you are supposed to remind us that we have an obligation NOT to burn through every available public resource in our short life span, that we don't have a monopoly on great ideas, and that we who are living in D.C. now do not have exclusive rights to everything we see from our new apartment balconies. What we have is actually just on loan.

Fate has given you the power to either endorse this contemptible project or squash it. You can allow a piece of history to be destroyed instead of preserved. You can let water, the purpose of the entire McMillan site - and the universal and increasingly precious requirement for life - get buried and taken for granted rather than being recognized and appreciated. You can let yet another stack of apartments go up (though even real estate bloggers are assessing D.C.'s housing as "overbuilt") instead of reserving public land for a sorely-needed public park. You can allow a small number of people to exploit a public resource to make a handsome profit over a short period of time (and with little risk) instead of acknowledging the importance of this incomparable and historic site.

If you cave and take the easy path, do so with the understanding that in a few short years your decision will be vilified. In ten years the project will look dated; in twenty it will look shabby. In an instant, pre-fab, homogenous country, people will hunger for history and authenticity more than ever, and they will wonder how arrogance or greed or ordinary short-sightedness prevailed and let this thing happen.

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