



1A ADVISORY NEIGHBORHOOD COMMISSION 1A
Single Member District 1A08

608 Rock Creek Church Road, NW Washington, DC 20010

Testimony of Kent Boese
Before the Zoning Commission for the District of Columbia
On
Zoning Case 14-11 (R-4 Text Amendments)
Thursday, January 15, 2015

Chairman Hood and members of the Zoning Commission, I thank you for this opportunity to personally speak in favor of the proposed Text Amendments to the Zoning Regulations as they relate to our residential rowhouse neighborhoods. As you are aware, I authored the resolution supporting these amendments that Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1A considered and supported unanimously. Similarly, ANCs 1B, 1C, 1D, 4C, 6A and 6B also support amending the R-4 text.

The issue before us is of critical importance. Our city is growing. We have a real need for more housing. Yet we do not have the tools, oversight, process, or design review we need to manage new development in the balanced manner that is respectful of the architectural character of our historic rowhouse neighborhoods and the people who live in them.

I have seen beautiful, architecturally sensitive 'pop-ups' built in Columbia Heights. This tells me that the type of development I am advocating for can be done and can be done profitably. When 'pop-ups' are designed by a skilled hand, few in the community object to them. Unfortunately, these tend to be the exception rather than the rule. Perhaps even more alarming, when such construction is done poorly, not only are the aesthetics questionable, but so is the resulting safety of the construction.

Many of us who live in rowhouse neighborhoods – whether lifelong Washingtonians or recently arrived – chose to live in them because of their attractive architecture, because the housing is large enough to raise a family in, and/or because the density allows neighbors to get to know each other resulting in a strong sense of community. Yet, as the existing R-4 text allows the conversion of existing rowhouses into apartments, the very quality of life that residents living in rowhouse communities cherish is at risk of being lost unless we find a successful way to manage this change.

Amending the R-4 text to bring it into compliance with the intent of the Zone is both good and necessary. As proposed, it does not take away anyone's personal property rights, but rather provides the special exception process as the avenue through which additional height and density can be reviewed to reduce adverse impacts on the community. In densely populated rowhouse communities it is our duty as public servants to ensure that we have everyone's best interest before us and balance the needs of all residents – not just the interests of developers or those who have just moved here. Washington must continue to be inclusive and accessible to all and find a path forward that is beneficial to all.

ZONING COMMISSION
District of Columbia

CASE NO. 14-11

EXHIBIT NO. 99

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Some in opposition to the proposed text amendments argue that they are not needed because ANCs tend to support the Zoning cases brought before them and that the amendments would result in less incentive to renovate neglected properties. This argument is flawed. It presumes that ANCs rubber stamp Zoning applications and that we are only addressing distressed properties. When considering a Zoning Case, property condition is a factor, but so is the building's use, architectural design, the impact on the community, and the impact on parking. I understand that not all of these things are strictly zoning issues, but the dialogue between the community and property owners that the special exception process creates is highly valuable and desirable in finding successful and beneficial paths forward. In short, it provides some opportunity to collaboratively manage the change in our communities.

Washington rowhouses are the quintessential housing type for residential, unofficial D.C. These are the buildings that come to mind when we think about where Washingtonians live as opposed to where the Federal Government works. The D.C. rowhouse is so much a part of our city's architectural character that it is impossible to depict unofficial Washington in films and television shows without them. D.C. rowhouses from Capitol Hill to Georgetown, Columbia Heights, Bloomingdale, and Barney Circle, to name a few neighborhoods, have shown up in movies and on television time and again as representatives of 'real' Washington.



(Opening scene from the television series *House of Cards* showing Bloomingdale and Eckington rowhouses with the U.S. Capitol in the distance)

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D.C. rowhouses are such a character defining feature of Washington that we find them representing us in other ways as well. In 2003, the United States Postal Service issued a postage stamp commemorating the District of Columbia. The stamp included a map of the downtown core; a view of the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument, and the U.S. Capitol; cherry blossoms; and rowhouses from the Shaw neighborhood. Of these elements, only the rowhouses truly represent ‘real’ Washington and those who live here. Similarly, the ornaments on the holiday tree representing the District of Columbia at the National Christmas Tree in 2014 were made by 5th grade students from DC Bilingual Public Charter School who used DC’s rowhouse architectural styles and the people who live in the District as their inspiration. Even the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs uses Washington rowhouses for the basis of their department’s logo. For District leaders to not recognize the value of our rowhouse neighborhoods and find ways to protect them as our city grows would be shortsighted at best, and criminal at worst.



DEPARTMENT OF CONSUMER & REGULATORY AFFAIRS
(DCRA’s logo, inspired by Washington rowhouses)

Personally, I strongly believe in protecting the character of our rowhouse architecture in a balanced and thoughtful way. However, this approach is not possible in our city at this time unless one happens to be within a historic district. I believe that the text amendments before us is an excellent first step in developing a process to effectively manage our changing rowhouse communities. Developing this process, however, requires vision and courage. We must have the vision to protect D.C.’s architectural legacy for generations to enjoy and the courage to find ways to incorporate new development within old neighborhoods.

Our goal should not be to stop development or ‘pop-ups’ in rowhouse neighborhoods, but rather to develop a process that provides the necessary design review and oversight so that such changes are in keeping with the character of the surrounding neighborhood. We must ensure that as development changes our neighborhoods – and our neighborhoods are going to change – that we ensure that they continue to support a high quality of life for all.

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Our Zoning code must be logical, predictable, and provide a stable environment for developers and residents alike. The necessity of amending the R-4 text to conform to the intent of the Zone should be obvious. We also must be committed to reviewing the current R-4 boundaries to ensure that they remain appropriate, and be open to changing those boundaries in areas where upzoning would be beneficial to the city.

The responsibility lies with us – with the Zoning Commission, the Office of Planning, the ANCs, and our city leaders. We have been entrusted with the safekeeping of all that makes D.C. the special and beautiful place that it is. It is our task to ensure that as we grow in population that we find better ways to manage the development that is necessary in our city and which must occur.

I am asking for the Zoning Commission's support today. By approving the text amendments to the R-4 Zone, you give all of us a more solid footing and a better foundation from which to fairly continue to find common ground as the city grows and develops.