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ARE POP-UPS DESTROYING THE CITY?

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Anti-pop-up hysteria is the result of a complex mix of social and economic anxieties born of **ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE**, portrayed with **MISLEADING VIVIDNESS**, inspiring dire predictions of a **PARADE OF HORRIBLE OUTCOMES**, and promoted through a self-reinforcing and self-referencing belief system involving traditional media outlets and social media interactions. The current anti-pop-up hysteria in Washington, D.C., features several classic examples of **NIMBYISM**.

- **Visual blight and failure to “blend in” with the surrounding architecture:** Opponents of new projects claim they are ugly or particularly large, or cast large shadows due to their height.
- **Loss of a community’s small-town feel:** Proposals that might result in new people moving into the community, such as plans to build new houses, are often claimed to change the community’s character
- **Strain on public resources and schools:** These reasons are given as arguments against any increase in population
- **Disproportionate benefit to non-locals:** Projects appear to benefit distant people, such as investors or people from neighboring areas

In Washington, D.C., each of the above arguments have been uncritically embraced by vocal opponents of pop-ups. Interestingly, the strain on public resources argument claims that new housing provided by pop-ups simultaneously will (A) overburden the city’s physical infrastructure and (B) increase the city’s population but result in a decline in the number of school-age children, harming the city’s educational system.

There is no credible evidence that pop-ups will bring forth this **PARADE OF HORRIBLE OUTCOMES** predicted by anti-pop-up hysteria. **ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE** presented with **MISLEADING VIVIDNESS** pervades every discussion at anti-pop-up community meetings and in social media. Traditional media outlets report the exaggerated fears expressed by pop-up opponents but offer scant perspective.

THE PROBLEM WITH 14-11

Supporters of 14-11 constantly invoke a small number of “problem” pop-ups as evidence that very soon the entire city will be destroyed forever unless something is done immediately. There are even some who oppose 14-11 because it does not propose to take away even more property rights with even greater haste.

Yet the most commonly cited “problem” pop-ups are not even located in R-4 zones.

The proposals in case 14-11 will restrict and reduce the property rights of the owners of more than 35,000 homes in R-4 zoned neighborhoods in an explicit effort to stop new pop-ups. But if reliable data on the number of recently completed, in-progress, or prospective pop-ups in R-4 zones exists, it is a well kept secret.

Question: How many pop-ups currently exist in R-4 zones? How many are currently under construction? How many are in the pipeline? How many are truly problematic?

Answer: Nobody seems to know. Pending hard data from the appropriate city agencies, we are left to our own devices in estimating the scope of the situation.

Try this thought experiment. If just ONE PERCENT of the 35,000 homes in R-4 zones are “problem” pop-ups that means there are THREE HUNDRED AND FIFTY “problem” pop-ups in R-4 zones. Does anyone believe that is the reality? If there really are as many as 350 “problem” pop-ups, that means no one is reporting on the vast majority of them. Given the current state of anti-pop-up hysteria in our city, this hardly seems likely.

The self-evident conclusion we can draw from this thought experiment is that over 99% of the 35,000 homes in R-4 zones are not “problem” pop-ups. Our experiment doesn’t tell us how many pop-ups exist in R-4 zones, but we can be confident that whatever the actual number, there are very, very few that truly are problematic.

Accepting this analysis, the label “anti-pop-up hysteria” does seem an appropriate term to describe the efforts of a vocal few to take away the rights of so many with so little evidence to support their extravagant claims of doom.

STOPPING THE HYSTERIA

Recent media reports have identified certain developers who are associated with problem pop-ups. Stopping these few inexperienced, incompetent, or dishonest developers is the best solution to “problem” pop-ups. Enacting regulations that will punish every developer and erode the property rights of every home owner is perhaps the worst possible solution.

Respectfully submitted by

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Post Script: Apologies to the Zoning Commissioners

The author of this document has followed the public discussion of pop-ups in Washington, D.C. for more than ten years. The information presented here is primarily for the public record and those members of the public who might read this record. The author realizes the Zoning Commissioners are aware of the current state of the debate.

SOURCE NOTES: For working definitions of (1) anecdotal evidence (2) misleading vividness (3) parade of horribles and (4) a survey of the varieties of NIMBYism, the reader is invited to consult Wikipedia, from which the author has drawn freely.