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May 18, 2015

Zoning Commission
441 4th St. NW, Suite 200-S
Washington, DC 20001

RE: Case No. ZC 14-11

Dear Zoning Commissioners:

Please accept my comments on the proposed rule to deal with pop-up developments in R-4 Districts. I commend the Zoning Commission for taking this important step to address concerns raised by District residents.

Matter-of-Right Conversions

I do not believe the proposed rule goes far enough to protect the supply of single-family homes in R-4 zones. Proposed new section 330.7 would permit conversions of existing residential buildings to apartment houses with up to four units as a matter-of-right. The decision to allow matter-of-right conversions of rowhouses in R-4 zones is a mistake. Family households with children need larger housing units with more bedrooms. The District's Comprehensive Plan states that of the city's existing housing stock, only one-third of the units have three bedrooms or more, and 80% of recent new construction has been apartments with fewer bedrooms. The Comprehensive Plan also states that the availability of single-family housing and housing with more rooms are two factors that are positively correlated with retaining family households.

The Comprehensive Plan guides the District's development and provides overall guidance about the city's planning. The Comprehensive Plan states:

Policy H-1.3.1, Housing for Families: Provide a larger number of housing units for families with children by encouraging new and retaining existing single family homes, duplexes, row houses, and three- and four-bedroom apartments.

Action H-1.3.A, Review Residential Zoning Regulations: During the revision of the city's zoning regulations, review the residential zoning regulations, particularly the R-4 (row house) zone. Make necessary changes to preserve row houses as single-family units to conserve the city's inventory of housing for larger households. As noted in the Land Use Element, this should include creating an R-4-A zone for one- and two-family row houses, and another zone for multi-family row house flats.

Matter-of-right conversions of single-family rowhouses to apartment buildings goes against the Comprehensive Plan's goal of retaining single-family homes for families. Matter-of-right conversions in R-4 should be limited to two-units.

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Limitations on Conversions

Although I don't support matter-of-right conversions to apartment houses, I support the limitations on conversions in section 330.7. These limitations also should apply to conversions to two-unit flats. Many developers convert rowhouses to two-units by adding a floor and large rear additions. These limitations must apply to two-unit conversions to protect adjacent properties from massive rear additions and upper floors that block chimneys and solar panels.

Immediate Effective Date

I urge the Zoning Commission to act quickly on the changes to the zoning rules and to make the final rule effective immediately to protect rowhouse neighborhoods and adjoining properties. The first proposal from the Office of Planning is almost one year old. D.C. residents have been waiting a long time for these changes and should not have to wait any longer.

I have been a DC resident in the neighborhood of Bloomingdale for almost four years. In that time, I have seen my neighborhood, as well as others, undergo dramatic changes. Although development is a complex issue for any city administration to address, there are better and worse ways to build. I have had the opportunity to be a volunteer crew leader with the Washington, DC affiliate of Habitat for Humanity for almost six years. In that time, I have helped to construct and lead volunteers in the construction of dozens of homes in Ivy City and Deanwood. These neighborhoods have also undergone dramatic changes, but in a different way. The approach DC Habitat takes to develop is an exemplary model of the effort to maintain affordable housing in the district. The architects who design the homes we build in the neighborhood of Ivy City integrate the aesthetic elements of the surrounding houses into their designs, and the affiliate builds with the underlying goal of providing simple, decent, truly affordable, quality housing. This approach sits in stark contrast to the goals of profit-driven developers who disregard the impact their construction has on the neighborhood, and whose only goal seemingly is to maximize their return in as short time as possible. I hope the Commission considers the overall impact of allowing this kind of development to continue without changing the zoning rules.

Respectfully submitted,

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