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Dear Park and Planning Commission

I am writing as a Washington resident for ten years, a home-owner in the Park View neighborhood, and a graduate student of architecture and urban planning about Case 14-11. The proposed zoning changes will be a great deterrent to the diversity of housing stock and ability of people – of all ages, lifestyle, and incomes to live in our great city.

I applaud the intention of the proposed changes in the R-4 zoning to encourage more multifamily housing, limit destruction of neighborhood character, and halt the creation of badly designed rowhouse and multifamily structures. However, limiting height and, in effect, density and types of housing is not the solution. First, one reason housing prices are so high in Washington – is high demand and a large supply of small, badly maintained historic buildings. Simple economics makes obvious that fact that limiting building heights will limit the supply of housing – which will raise prices and further drive out the poor from our city.

But what of families who are finding beautiful three bedrooms rowhouses converted into studios? The DC office of planning has made the spurious correlation that raising prices for three bedrooms meant that existing three bedroom and up rowhouses would be adequate for families. The average household size of new single-family home construction in America is above 2,000 sq feet with oftentimes three bathrooms or more. Many current townhouses, built in the early 20th century, could not attract families even if zoning was made to prevent their height. The layout and size would more likely attract single adults or couples.

By restricting height limits, Washington will in fact prevent new townhouses that could attract families from ever getting renovated or expanded. There is not guarantee that by not allowing height limits, suddenly more families will have places to live. Just as likely, those row houses will either lay vacant or be made into larger one and two bedroom flats where the third bedroom has been converted into a bathroom. Moreover, less than 10% of district residents are families of more than one kid. I ask that you read the city planning blog – Greater Greater Washington's analysis of how the zoning changes will actually not benefit families.

So what are we to do? Allow developers to continue the destruction of our historic neighborhoods and build only for the young, single, and wealthy? Of course not. The solution lies in the character of what we build. Instead of zoning against density and height, the office of planning should encourage more sensitive building codes by overlaying these neighborhoods with form based codes that would allow for setbacks and allow for reasonable light air and similar character to the neighborhood. It could also make stipulations that you can only pop-up if you offer either an affordable unit or a unit of three or more bedrooms. I value social equity for neighborhoods over aesthetics – and I think this would be a reasonable compromise.

ZONING COMMISSION
District of ColumbiaCASE NO. 14-11
EXHIBIT NO. 30

The issue of multifamily housing and affordable housing could similarly be tackled. The city of Vancouver faced similar issues in the 1990s and made a zoning requirement for all apartments to accommodate family units on the first few floors of the all new construction- furthermore, they stipulated a form based code that included townhouse style construction for those units, play areas in the green spaces, and nurseries. Vancouver now is one of the only cities in America with a larger family population than young professional. Washington, DC could be on that list too.

Affordable housing could also be creatively tackle the high demand of one-bedroom units by allowing more accessory dwelling units – like garages and basement units- to be inhabited by right. Furthermore, the city could investigate ways to target specific neighborhoods and route trash into community trash bins or front pick up – allowing alleys to become pedestrianized and apartment converted garages to be filled with the single young professionals currently crowding the more family oriented row house market. This would overall increase the supply of housing so that less pressure would be put on developers to build pop-up row houses. It would also allow developers to buy and develop deteriorating housing stock and have a place to expand without going up and destroying the neighborhood character.

Affordable and family housing could even be made through a tax to developers. Let them build taller in R-4 zones but force them to pay a large fee which goes into a fund that helps finance keeping rowhouses and family style apartments getting built or maintained. An outright ban would only harm our city.

Lastly, I want to end on a visual of sensitive pop-up design. Pop-ups can be historically sensitive and add to the neighborhoods density and diversity. One excellent example below is this historic rowhouse on 13th Street NW near Florida Ave. It responded to the local context – similar brick and window articulation- but is clearly would fail under the current revision of guidelines of 35'. So, this zoning law could very well be denying beautiful, respectful buildings like this from ever existing.



Washington has amazing, diverse architecture that allows for a variety of people to live here. Cities, like Washington, should respond and change over time- reacting to populations, racial, and demographic changes. They are living and evolving but the more variety there is in the buildings – from tiny studios to giant six bedrooms mansions- the more diverse types of people can live here. Changing height restrictions for R-4 could not only harm housing stock diversity, it could make Washington less affordable, and be counter productive in efforts to attract families.

Sincerely,

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