

Testimony – Case No. 14-18A

My name is Vincent DeLaurentis and I am a student at Georgetown University and an intern at ONE DC. Through my work at ONE DC, I have been meeting with and getting to know the residents of Brookland Manor for around a year and a half now and I have spent a significant amount of time at the property. I am here today to testify against the proposal submitted by MidCity Financial and to urge the Zoning Commission to vote against this proposal.

My Jesuit education has taught me that it is important to act as men and women for others. This is a lesson that MidCity Financial would do well to learn. In my time at the property, I have seen MidCity act in a way that does not demonstrate even the most basic concern for the people who live at Brookland Manor.

In the year and a half that I have been on the property I have seen numerous fences put up and a large reduction in the amount of green space available to tenants. The fences makes it incredibly difficult for people, especially seniors and people with disabilities, to get around the property and has stopped elderly and disabled people from attending meetings and community events. Not only does this isolate these people from their communities, it cuts them off from vital information about the redevelopment process and their rights during it. The lack of green space has made it difficult for children to exist on the property. When children are outside, they are subject to constant surveillance and harassment by the security forces. They are made to feel unwelcome in their own homes and unsafe in their own communities. The message has been clear from MidCity to the tenants, we do not care about you and we do not want you here.

This constant surveillance, lack of green space, and new fencing makes Brookland Manor look and feel like a prison. This is no way to live and it is unacceptable that the residents of Brookland Manor, who are majority black and low income, are subjected to this. Let me make this explicit, if middle class white people were living in these buildings MidCity would not be doing this and, if they were, the City would show greater concern. To MidCity, Black comfort, black homes, and black communities do not matter.

Finally, MidCity has implemented an aggressive security program that has made living on the property difficult for tenants. Tenants are constantly being watched by the security guards and the smallest incident is turned into a notice of infraction. Tenants cannot feel comfortable walking around the property or being outside. In my time on the property, I have noticed that the security is constantly present, not to make the property safer, but to regulate and punish the tenants, handing out warnings and infractions that threaten the housing security of BM tenants with impunity. I myself have dealt with

these security guards. On two separate occasions, I have been threatened with arrest while talking to and canvassing tenants with the express permission of the resident association. This has interfered with the tenants right to organize and has intimidated tenants when they are standing up for their rights. MidCity Financial has talked about creating a diverse, mixed income community at the new property they are seeking to build. Why then, are they so afraid of me, a middle class white person, talking to the tenants now? I can only imagine the security situation getting worse for low-income and black residents after this redevelopment.

I was here for the last hearing on Brookland Manor about a month ago. MidCity did little to assuage my fears of their intentions. The fact that MidCity representatives were able to talk ad nauseum about blond brick and cornices, but could not provide clear information on affordable housing and requirements to return at the new property was almost comical. With all of the resources that MidCity has and the six figure salaries that people like Michael Meers make, there is no excuse for this obfuscation. At the last meeting, MidCity and its representatives embodied what the philosopher Hannah Arendt has called the "banality of evil".

From my time at Brookland manor, it has become apparent that MidCity is trying to do everything in its power to clear out large families and most other residents by making them feel unwelcome and unsafe. In doing this, MidCity will have to build back fewer affordable units. It is clear that MidCity and Michael Meers are putting their profit over the people of Brookland Manor. They are able to do this because the people who live at Brookland Manor are mostly black and have access to few resources. Again, I want to make this incredibly explicit this blatant disregard towards and active displacement of the residents is only possible because they are black and low income. The City must not allow this to continue

To conclude, I would like to urge the Zoning Commission to vote against this proposal. The demands presented by the residents tonight have been more than reasonable and ensuring these demands would prove the public benefit of this project in the middle of a housing crisis in the District. Based on my experiences at Brookland Manor, I can see no public benefit coming from MidCity's plans because the corporation has mistreated and harassed residents of Brookland Manor and continues to do so. I would also like to remind the Zoning Commission that the fact that MidCity will turn a profit off of this project does not prove public benefit. Private profit is not public benefit, however affordable housing, especially in these times, is. For this reason, I urge you to vote against MidCity's proposal and to refuse to allow this project to continue until MidCity agrees to the tenants of Brookland Manor's demands to bring back all of the affordable housing on the property at its current bedroom size, as well as all residents who wish to return.