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Brookland Manor Zoning Hearing Testimony

My name is Matthew Shields, and I am a Ward 5 resident. I live on Evarts and 4th Street Northeast. I wanted to speak today because I want to oppose as forcefully as I can Mid-City Financial's plans to destroy and reduce affordable housing in Brookland Manor and their vicious and discriminatory displacement tactics, which have been well-documented.¹ I want to support equally as strongly the demands of Brookland Manor tenants and their allies.²

It is inexplicable to me that in a city where affordable housing hardly exists³ and where gentrification is so openly and brutally displacing residents throughout the city, we would even be considering such a plan. If we are going to talk about anything, we should be talking about substantially *expanding* affordable housing, along with all the various ways we need to do a far better job supporting our most vulnerable residents.

Professionally, I'm pursuing a PhD in the philosophy of language at Georgetown, so I think a lot about the meaning of our terms. In the previous zoning hearing, Mid-City Financial referred to the displacement of Brookland Manor tenants as "natural attrition".⁴ They call displacement "natural" because this allows us everyone off the hook; it means no one is responsible for what happens to these tenants, for the devastation of their livelihoods. It's just the way things are. But nothing could be further from the truth. These policies can only be enacted if we choose them, if we let them happen. And they can be stopped if we choose to stop them. There is nothing "natural" about it. We should – and we will – hold those responsible, including this Commission, if they allow this entirely *unnatural* attrition to take place.

Developers look at someone like me – a white young person – and use the movements of my demographic to pursue these plans and then do everything in their power to displace Black and Brown residents who are economically marginalized. This makes me complicit in what is transpiring today. But Mid-City Financial and the Commission should know that we will categorically oppose these efforts, we will not allow ourselves to be used in this way, and we will stand with our neighbors.

None of us should want to live in a community where you can be kicked out – stripped of your home, your relationships, and your livelihood – just because someone deems you not 'useful' anymore or because others are now deemed to be more 'useful'. Our right to a decent life should not be contingent on the whims of corporate greed. That's no right at all; it's a form of thinking incompatible with a truly free and democratic community. I urge in the strongest terms possible that the Commission stand with the tenants of Brookland Manor on the side dignity, rather than on the side of Mid-City Financial and corporate greed and cruelty.

¹ http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/local/2016/08/08/as-the-nations-capital-booms-poor-tenants-face-eviction-over-as-little-as-25/?tid=a_inl. Also see the February 14, 2017 letter to Councilmember Kenyan McDuffie from Frank Natale, Director of Litigation and Advocacy for Neighborhood Legal Services Program (NLSP) of DC.

² The demands that were clearly outlined in the February 15, 2017 letter to Councilmember Kenyan McDuffie from the Brookland Manor/Brentwood Village Resident Association, a letter endorsed by over 30 community organizations.

³ "Going, Going, Gone: DC's Vanishing Affordable Housing" from the DC Fiscal Policy Institute (by Wes Rivers) <http://www.dcfpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Going-Going-Gone-Rent-Burden-Final-3-6-15format-v2-3-10-15.pdf>

⁴ <https://planning.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/op/publication/attachments/14-18%20Brookland%20Manor%20OP%20Hearing%20Report.FINAL-signed.pdf>. See page 6.