

Dear members of the DC Zoning Commission,

Thanks for taking the time to consider my thoughts about the proposed redevelopment at what used to be Bruce Monroe School. I live in ANC1A with my wife and our two young children. We enjoy playing at the park created there by then-Mayor Adrian Fenty and past Ward 1 Councilmember Jim Graham.

In addition, I have lived and/or worked in the Columbia Heights/Park View area for more than thirty years. For the past twelve years, I have served low-income seniors around the Bruce Monroe site including numerous folks at the Park Morton complex. As a member of St. Aloysius Catholic Church and grassroots community organization Northwest One Council I participated in the creation of the New Communities Initiative in 2004 and 2005. Finally, I grew up on a farm and ranch in northeastern Montana, and know how important it is to have green, open spaces, especially for our kids.

All of this helps explain why I strongly support the redevelopment the city has proposed for the Bruce Monroe site. In fact, I see the proposal as a “win-win” for the community as a whole, for it promises to not only improve the recreation facilities for families like mine, but honor a critical promise made a decade ago. This was a promise from high-ranking city officials--made in public meetings that I attended at Bruce Monroe School when it was still standing--to Park Morton residents that they would have new housing in their neighborhood, and would not be displaced from their long-time home.

It has been heartbreaking to see the division created by Mayor Bowser's balanced, humane and commonsensical proposal. I'm a country kid who now has my own children. I would hate to lose a park--but that is not what will happen here. Instead, this underutilized lot will be developed into an improved park, while creating mixed income housing, including desperately needed “Build First” units for Park Morton residents.

The most important element of New Communities from the outset has been the “Build First” idea. This simply means that new housing would be constructed first within a couple blocks of an existing complex so that residents can stay in the community to enjoy the improvements, not be displaced all over the city. Park Morton has faced many challenges with poverty, violence and drug trafficking--issues that have been especially troubling for the vast majority of law-abiding residents there who are forced to live amidst chaos and insecurity. When the New Communities Initiative stalled, residents were left adrift, fearing that the project would collapse entirely. Fortunately, Mayor Bowser has hired long-time community advocate, Angie Rodgers, to head up New Communities and is working with an impressive set of community builders. This is no giveaway to developers, but a chance to make good on life-or-death promises.

We must also recall that this development is on “The Avenue”--Georgia Avenue--one of the most celebrated and significant streets in this capital city. Already buildings of four, five, six, and seven stories stand within five blocks of the Bruce Monroe lot. As such, this development would seem to fit well with the scale and tenor of the existing corridor, while doing a good job of balancing competing community desires.

Again, I am an advocate for parks, and have been happy to see the improvements at various nearby sites, including Trolley Park and Girard and Taylor Streets. In this case, improving the park while also creating housing--especially for long-term, low-income residents who rightly fear being driven from their homes by a rising cost of living--seems far more important for our community as a whole than keeping the entire lot as a park.

Thanks again for considering my thoughts. I hope they will help at least a little bit to ease the division, anger, and fear, encouraging us all to live together as one family.