

ward3vision

smart growth • vibrant neighborhoods

September 28, 2017

Chairman Anthony Hood
DC Zoning Commission
441 4th Street, NW, Suite 210
Washington, DC 20001

RE: Testimony in Support of Zoning Case No. 16-26
Application of Wisconsin Owner LLC
for Approval of a Consolidated PUD and Map Amendment
for Property on Wisconsin Avenue, NW in Tenleytown

Chairman Hood & members of the Zoning Commission:

My name is Susan Kimmel. I live in Tenleytown, a block and a half away from the proposed project, but tonight I have been authorized to speak on behalf of Ward3Vision, a grass-roots, advocacy organization of residents who support measures to make our neighborhoods even better urban places - more walkable, bikeable, sustainable, and vibrant.

“Smart growth” and “transit-oriented development” are short-hand terms for the type of development we support. This includes residential growth near transit; commercial development nearby that serves residents; and growth that is environmentally and socially responsible. Bringing vitality to our commercial corridors such as Wisconsin Avenue is a key ingredient of Smart Growth, along with increased residential density essential to supporting these commercial amenities. All these things, as well as increasing affordable housing, are exemplified by the PUD application before you, and accordingly Ward 3 Vision strongly supports it.

The applicant, Urban Investment Partners (UIP), proposes to renovate existing multi-story office buildings facing Wisconsin Avenue, some of which are now and have been for some time mostly empty. The current state of affairs is particularly undesirable, because the site is located within two blocks of the Tenley Metro Station and on a bus corridor. A mixed-use building containing 146 apartments, a sit-down restaurant and other retail, as is proposed, is exactly what needs to be there. It gives those who cannot afford to buy an expensive single-family house (or do not want one) a chance to live in a great neighborhood and benefit from a Metro station and amenities nearby (including a grocery store). It encourages folks to use public transportation or walk or bike, rather than increasing vehicle congestion by living further out, with the attendant environmental degradation. It grows the tax base for DC.

We applaud that the proposed development will seek to be LEED Gold-certified and contain a substantial amount of solar-generated energy and use high-efficiency HVAC systems. The green roofs of the tiered west façade will provide both attractive views and reduce storm water run-off. Also, by retrofitting the existing buildings, the developer will be conserving energy and building materials by avoiding demolition. This type of adaptive reuse represents construction at the highest level of environmental responsibility.

We also applaud the developer's commitment to provide more affordable housing than the Inclusionary Zoning regulations mandate (ten percent of the residential gross floor area, rather than 8 percent), including one of the larger units, and five times more than if the building were built as a matter-of-right. With an affordable housing crisis in DC now, and especially in Ward 3 where housing is extremely expensive, this is something of great value.

We also welcome the other amenities proposed, such as renovating an existing dilapidated building across the street to serve the community (one of the few remaining historic structures of the post-Civil War Tenleytown), undergrounding utilities, and building a park at Brandywine and 42nd Street, now a dangerous intersection. These add great aesthetic and practical value to the area.

The height at 88 feet is appropriate to this location. It is, as noted, right on a major commercial corridor and is massed toward Wisconsin Ave. with rear step-backs along the alley buffering the houses along 42nd St. This "wedding cake," tiered, style of massing will significantly reduce the perceived scale of the UIP project from the residential neighborhood. Furthermore, the proposed building will be substantially the same height as the Tenley View building next door, so it will be consistent with the scale of its surroundings.

We strongly believe that this site is well suited for the requested height of 88' that exceeds the 50-foot allowance for a MOR building in MU-4 but is within the limits for a mixed-use PUD set at 90'. The building is located on the west side of Wisconsin at the point where 41st St. peels off to the east. This geometry vastly expands the cone of vision and creates a backdrop for the drama of a taller building. In fact, we believe that it would be a waste of urban design opportunities not to construct a building of significant size at this location. From the standpoint of design, we particularly appreciate how the articulation of the façade is detailed to follow the contour of the hill. Furthermore, the developer has paid close attention to the challenges of pedestrian access to the ground-floor retail where the topography makes it challenging to provide stepless entrances. The design has created a grand staircase but also has 2 points of entry to plaza or patio areas, which are accessible to persons with disabilities. In addition, we strongly contend that the extra density near Metro, plus the retail, and other amenities offered by the PUD justify the additional height.

We want the Commission to know that this developer has engaged the community through the ANC and at other forums, to an extraordinary degree. The developer has been responsive to comments, even removing a penthouse story (which Ward3Vision would have preferred to retain), creating step-backs and changing the façade and other design elements. The proposal for a sit-down restaurant is another way in which the developer has responded to community desires.

Finally, we concur with the applicant that this development is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan. The Commission found this to be the case for the PUD development of the mixed-use building immediately beside this project, now called Tenley View, ZC Case No. 10-23 (Jemal's Babes, LLC). Both sites are designated for mixed-use development where a PUD can be 90 feet. Although the Tenley View building is six stories and the proposed one is eight, the Comprehensive Plan indicates that flexibility is appropriate through a PUD when the overall policies of the Plan are furthered. See, e.g., Comprehensive Plan § 226.1(c)—the Guidelines for using the FLUM state: “It should be noted that the granting of density bonuses (for example, through Planned Unit Developments) may result in heights that exceed the typical ranges.” The Commission in No. 10-23 set out all many Comprehensive Plan policies supported by that development (pp. 10-15), and the reasoning applies to this PUD as well. Moreover, the Office of Planning issued its report for ZC 16-26 with an appendix citing 22 provisions of the comprehensive plan, which are advanced by the features of this project.

Most important, in our view, is the fact that this project corresponds squarely with the principles set forth in the Land Use Element of the Comprehensive Plan (Chapter 3) to locate development near Metro stations and along transit corridors. See, e.g., LU-1.3, 1.3.2 (“Fully capitalizing on the investment in Metrorail requires better use of the land around transit stations and along transit corridors.”) This is why we support the project and why this Commission should too.

We urge the Commission to act expeditiously to approve this PUD proposal.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan Kimmel, Chair
On behalf of
Ward3Vision