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From the Washington Business Journal:

<https://www.bizjournals.com/washington/news/2021/05/04/industrial-land-dc-comp-plan.html>

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Does D.C. need to protect industrial land from redevelopment? It's the latest comprehensive plan controversy.



Image: Google Maps

In neighborhoods like Ivy City, trendy destinations like One Eight Distillery sit adjacent to warehouses and auto storage. Developers fear some Comprehensive Plan changes could complicate efforts to build similar neighborhoods.

ZONING COMMISSION
District of Columbia
CASE NO. 24-11
EXHIBIT NO. 139C



By Alex Koma – Staff Reporter, Washington Business Journal
May 4, 2021

There's perhaps no greater example of how a D.C. neighborhood can evolve away from an industrial past than Ivy City's rapid redevelopment.

The Northeast D.C. area's old, art deco-style Hecht Warehouse is now a set of pricey loft apartments. A former tomato packing plant has become home to a Michelin-starred restaurant. And the owner of seafood distributor ProFish no longer just operates a massive warehouse – he has the trendy Ivy City Smokehouse restaurant and bar there too.

The area's transformation has long been seen as a triumph by many city officials. But some District leaders are now wondering whether they want to continue encouraging the wholesale transformation of formerly industrial areas.

The debate comes, not shockingly, thanks to proposed changes to the city's chief land-use document, the D.C. Comprehensive Plan. Amendments to the plan drafted by the D.C. Council would limit the repurposing of old factories and warehouses into new, mixed-use development, something that would have a huge impact on these parcels. Chairman Phil Mendelson, D-At large, authored the language, pursuing it out of a fear that too much of the city's industrial land is being gobbled up by new development.

But these changes have alarmed developers and Mayor Muriel Bowser's administration, who see little evidence that the District needs to preserve these properties when the demand for redevelopment is still so high. They see the changes endangering potential projects in burgeoning neighborhoods like Ivy City, Brookland or Brentwood.

It's one of many issues that lawmakers will debate Tuesday as the comp plan's amendments come up for the first of two long-awaited votes. While concerns over racial equity have thus far taken center stage as the council gears up to put the five-year-long comp plan debate to bed, the fate of industrial land could have a similarly large impact on the city's future.

"There are opportunities that can be unlocked in these areas, if they're allowed to be unlocked, especially around affordable housing," said Jeffrey Utz, a land-use attorney at Goulston & Storrs PC and the co-chair of the D.C. Building Industry Association's comp plan working group. "But these changes really limit what can be done. It's too much of an obstacle."

What would these changes do?

Specifically, the changes take aim at areas of the city zoned for "production, distribution and repair uses" (PDR) on the future land-use map, a tool designed to guide the amount of development allowed on D.C. properties.

Bowser's version of proposed changes would allow for the development of "compatible residential, office and retail uses" in these areas, but the council ditched that language in favor of a more restrictive approach. While the plan would still allow nonindustrial development on these sites, the council's edits would require the "long-term retention" of industrial uses as part of any project.

The amendments also state that "efforts to convert PDR land to other uses must be resisted," and mandate that the supply of such land in the District "should not fall below its current level." Planners estimate that these industrial zones total about 333 acres primarily concentrated in areas along New York Avenue NE, along the path of Metro's Red Line as it runs up to Takoma and on the eastern banks of the Anacostia River.

Lawmakers also rejected some of Bowser's proposals to add more density to select PDR parcels in Northeast D.C. Those efforts could have allowed mixed-use construction north of the Brookland Metro station, at Metro's Stone Straw building in Brentwood and on some properties in Eckington west of the train tracks.



Warehouse-laden properties near Eckington were targeted for redevelopment by the Bowser administration, but the D.C. Council could block those efforts.

GOOGLE MAPS

“With these properties along the Red Line, those are great, transit-oriented opportunities in high-opportunity areas,” said D.C. Planning Director Andrew Trueblood, who led the process of drafting Bowser’s amendments. “And there’s not a lot of existing industrial uses anyway in those areas.”

Utz is particularly concerned that the language will scare off developers eyeing projects in these areas. And he can’t understand how the city’s Zoning Commission would even begin to enforce the standard calling for the preservation of the existing amount of PDR land, because it’s difficult to track the properties citywide.

“Are we really at an inflection point with industrial land right now?” Utz said. “How did we land on this standard? It’s probably better to let the Zoning Commission weigh these questions as it reviews individual proposals.”

No land left?

Mendelson argues that the pressure on these parcels is very real, based on his staff’s research.

Because this industrial land is often cheaper, he’s seen much of it snapped up for everything from new housing to schools, even though these properties serve a vital function in the city. He notes that liquor wholesalers, who are generally required to store their wares in the District before shipping them elsewhere, could soon lack the space to meet that D.C. regulation.

“No one wants a concrete plant or an auto repair shop near their house, but we need them,” Mendelson said. “Are we all going to have to go out to the suburbs to get our cars fixed? At some point, we’re going to wake up and say, ‘Geez, there’s no land left for the warehouse or the concrete plant.’”

The chairman’s committee staff examined similarly sized cities and determined that D.C. should strive to at least maintain its existing stock of industrial land. But Mendelson’s comp plan amendments also direct city planners to compile an inventory of these properties and evaluate future needs.

In the meantime, Mendelson hopes the changes will slow the rapid pace of this development, and encourage projects that make more sense on existing PDR sites.

“Who is going to want to live above a beer distributor?” Mendelson said.

Based on his conversations with brokers, Utz doesn’t believe there actually is much demand in the market for more industrial space in D.C. Research from

Transwestern shows that supply has outpaced demand at the city's existing industrial properties four out of the last five years.

And he points to projects like Union Kitchen's forthcoming Eckington location as evidence that residential can coexist with industrial-style uses, if done creatively. The company is planning a mix of commercial food business incubator, storage and office space in the mixed-use Eckington Yards project from JBG Smith Properties and LCOR.

"It's a win-win if we do this right," Utz said.

Changes could dictate Ward 5's future

These comp plan changes aren't final yet. Lawmakers can edit the amendments at an initial vote Tuesday and another currently on the docket for May 18.

Much of the debate will likely be driven by the lawmaker with the most industrial land in his ward: Councilman Kenyan McDuffie, D-Ward 5.

McDuffie acknowledged Mendelson drove most of these changes to the PDR language, without his input, but he is not completely opposed to them. He would be open to loosening the restrictions Mendelson included on mixed-use development on these properties, but has thus far not been able to get that language changed, he said.

However, he did add a policy statement that points out that economic development that occurs on industrial property "benefits the entire District, yet its impacts are largely borne by the residents living in close proximity, and those are disproportionately residents of color."

McDuffie's changes, part of amendments released late Monday, also say that any efforts to expand the city's available industrial land "shall prioritize areas that do not currently have a disproportionate amount of PDR-designated land."