The Committee of 100
on the Federal City

Before the District of Columbia Zoning Commission
Comments by the Committee of 100 on Case ZC 25-08 –
Updates to RA-1 Zones

The Committee of 100 asks the Commission to make one change to the scope of development actions that may take place as a matter of right (MOR). We request that a special exception be required for any proposed development that will eliminate an existing side yard. We do not object to amendments allowing the limited expansion of existing multi-family buildings and to the construction of four-unit apartment buildings under the existing development standards.

For historic reasons discussed in the Office of Planning's (OP) Hearing Report, the RA-1 zone was created to bring order and predictability to areas where poorly sited, poorly constructed apartment buildings had been built alongside single-family houses and duplexes. RA-1 allowed multiple building types, with small apartment buildings as the dominant type, but required special exceptions and imposed heightened levels of review on new construction except for single-family homes and duplexes.

OP now proposes to allow for the MOR enlargement and renovation of existing multi-family buildings for the limited purposes of enlarging habitable rooms and constructing additional units within the square footage of the existing building. So long as all other enlargements require special exception relief, C100 does not object to what is proposed.

We do not object to the MOR construction of four-unit apartment buildings because this has been an allowed use for decades and is found throughout RA-1 zones, and because intrusion on neighboring properties of lower intensity – single-family houses and duplexes – is minimized by the requirement of two 8-foot side yards.

We object to allowing MOR construction of new rowhouses built to the lot line adjacent to a lower-intensity use, especially when combined with the reduced minimum lot width from 18 to 16 feet. In video presentations to ANCs, OP staff confirmed that this meant a single-family detached house on a 50-foot-wide lot could be replaced by three rowhouses built to the lot line. A neighboring single-family house would face a blank wall. Potentially, a single-family house could have rowhouse development on either side, effectively walling it in. This is precisely the kind of incongruous outcome that the RA-1 rules were designed to prevent, and would violate Subtitle F's mandate to "[e]ncourage compatibility between the location of new buildings or construction and the existing neighborhood." See F-101.2(e).

OP's Hearing Report explains the historical reasons for the haphazard housing types found in RA-1 zones. Prior to the zone's creation, cheap, poorly-sited apartment buildings were thrown up in Wards 7 and 8 to house African-Americans displaced from Southwest. The RA-1 rules were issued after the fact to impose a level of order and predictability to future development. Hence, the extensive use of special exceptions and the added disclosure rules and regulatory signoffs particular to RA-1 zones. These rules protect the neighborhood integrity for incoming African-Americans and as well as the existing white population. While OP and the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) characterize these amendments as a means of fostering racial equity and integration, the fact that most RA-1 zones are African-American neighborhoods means that little if any integration is likely to occur and any burdens imposed by the changes will fall mostly on African-American households.

OAG's proposed changes and the "gentle density" issue. We have reviewed the much more aggressive changes proposed by the OAG. We assume that OAG knows these ideas are outside the scope of this rulemaking and that it is simply using every opportunity to bring the "gentle density" issue before the public. OAG's comments state in part:

> The Comprehensive] P[lan] encourages modest increases in density and more diverse housing types in low- and moderate-density neighborhoods, especially to produce additional affordable housing. This "gentle" density, which is limited in scale and fits in with the existing built environment of low-rise houses with ample open space, is a critical tool to addressing past "discriminatory land use policies that have resulted in segregation by race and economic status."

OAG Report at 9-10 (footnote omitted).

First, these proposed amendment are not an exercise in "gentle density" and should not be viewed as a precedent. Gentle density typically refers to building multi-family dwellings – often 4 to 8 units – on single-family lots. Gentle density principles also hold that such incursions should be built in high-opportunity neighborhoods with rich amenities and near rapid transit hubs. As OP's Hearing Report documents, the bulk of the District's RA-1 zoned land is in Wards 7 and 8, which are neither high-opportunity, amenity-rich or well-served by transit. Racial equity cannot reasonably be used as a justification for these amendments. They simply make it easier to build low-density multi-family buildings that are already allowed in the zone.


Duplex to Quadplex, Often Designed to Blend in with Single-Family Housing

Another hallmark of gentle density is good design. OP's 2020 Report on missing middle housing includes this picture as an example of what missing-middle housing can be. This is a duplex converted to a quadruplex and designed to look like a single-family home. OP Report at 13.[1] In recent zoning actions,

[1] *Single-Family Zoning in the District of Columbia*, https://plandc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/Comprehensiveplan/007_Single%20Family%20Housing%20Report.pdf.

concern for neighborhood character has been derided as a code word for racism. Yet OP said in its 2020 report, "The Comp Plan Proposal repeatedly states that new development should not be 'architecturally distinguished and out of character' with its neighborhood and should 'avoid overpowering contrasts of scale and height'" (LU2.1). *Id*. at 12. Does that concern still apply?

Opportunity for Public Comment. The Committee of 100 advocates for public participation in decisionmaking. Our views in this case are based on the limited nature of the relief sought and the District's decades of experience with the mix of uses in RA-1 zones. The proposed grant of MOR ability in this case pales in comparison, and as we have noted, much RA-1 development remains subject to special exception approval, at least for the time being.

In Cases 25-09 and 25-13, the Committee fully aired the dangers of imposing MOR zoning forms that will govern major corridor development without public input for a generation. The proposed grant of MOR ability in this case pales in comparison, and as we have noted, much RA-1 development remains subject to special exception approval, at least for the time being.

We are dismayed at the wave of antiproceduralism that is sweeping through the District's local government as well as the national government.[2] In the zoning forum, antiproceduralism makes itself felt through the erosion of the ability to appeal zoning decisions, through restrictions on party status, and through increased MOR. In a city with limited and tenuous home rule, a decisionmaking body should guard against encroaching on the limited opportunities for public participation. If the Commission finds existing processes inefficient or ineffective, the answer is reform, not abolition. The Committee asks the Commission to halt future rollbacks of public participation and to seriously address – with the residents of the District – the public's role in zoning.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

/s/Laura M. Richards, Co-Chair, Zoning Subcommittee
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Shelly, Repp, Chair

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[2] Among many commenters on this trend, *see, e.g*., Jonathan Fabian Witt, *The Idea That Once Held America Together Died in 2025,* https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/24/opinion/democracy-america-bureaucracy.html?searchResultPosition=4:

> Process became the centerpiece of America's powerful commitment to democracy during the struggle with totalitarian regimes in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia…. But in the 2020s a surging antiproceduralism has produced a revolt against two generations of process thinking. In 2025, Congress seemed to lose control of its quintessential power over the appropriations process. Administrative agencies dispensed with the usual pathways of giving notice and inviting public comment….