

Supplemental Testimony of Christopher Vaden

Delay and uncertainty can kill investment in multifamily housing. The supplemental testimony of Somerset Development Company (Exh. 238) highlights why this problem is particularly acute for affordable housing projects, where financing has been especially precarious, but it is also a problem for market-rate projects with an IZ component. The design review process under consideration by the Commission for the new Wisconsin Avenue mixed use zones, while well-intentioned, would introduce both delay and uncertainty, significantly undermining the goal – expressed in the Comprehensive Plan and shared by the Commission and many of us in the community – of encouraging construction of substantially more affordable housing in Ward 3.

Jurisdictions around the country that want to encourage more housing construction – from California to Florida to Cambridge, Massachusetts -- are taking proactive steps to streamline the entitlements process and authorize by-right construction of affordable housing. Adding a distinct design review requirement to the new Wisconsin Avenue zones would be decidedly out of step with a growing nationwide consensus that there are too many barriers to building more housing, and especially affordable housing.

In deference to the Commission’s interest in exploring the possibility of a design review process for the new Wisconsin Avenue zones, the Office of Planning in its supplemental report provided language for text amendments that would create one. But OP *didn’t endorse* creating such a process. Rather, OP emphasized that it had incorporated design requirements into the zoning, “including proposed setbacks, upper level step-backs, façade articulation, open space, mid-block connections, and ground level streetscape character.” A new layer of design review is not necessary to achieve a consistent neighborhood character.

OP also noted pointedly that, “The reality is that there are also persons with intentions to delay projects through the appeal process.” And in the past, members of the Commission have noted the propensity for affordable housing projects in Ward 3 to meet with opposition from parties dedicated to maintaining the status quo. Those concerns are amply justified; opponents of development in Ward 3 have shown they have the commitment and resources to exploit available procedural avenues to stall or stymie development projects even if their objections are ultimately rejected.

Any benefits that might be conveyed by imposing a discretionary design review process would be dwarfed by the adverse effects on affordable housing construction of creating a new hurdle for developers to overcome.

Respectfully submitted,

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