

TENLEYTOWN NEIGHBORS ASSOCIATION

Comments on Zoning Commission Case 25-13 Wisconsin Avenue Upzone - Supplemental Report III

Statement of Chris Schumann, Vice President, TNA

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Wisconsin Avenue Supplemental Report III submitted by the DC Office of Planning (OP) on July 2, 2026, and for reopening the record on July 16, 2026.

Tenleytown Neighborhood Association (TNA) believes strongly in public participation. Our members live in the neighborhoods adjacent to Wisconsin Avenue and will be impacted by any development that takes place on Wisconsin. This does not mean that we are opposed to development, but it does mean that the neighbors should be heard when projects are proposed.

Through this rulemaking well over 100 lots are being upzoned on Wisconsin Avenue from Rodman Street to the Maryland border to allow matter of right development, to the maximum consistent with the FLUM and in some instances allowing over a 300% increase in density plus heights of 130 feet in Tenleytown and 150 feet in Friendship Heights.

We shall confine our comments to Supplemental Report III as submitted by OP.

It is important to remember the context for considering the extent of application of Design Review, which requires only a small expenditure of time. Design Review will be the only opportunity for public participation.

Any comments about the time and money Design Review may require must be considered within the context that the developers are getting a great deal of “bonus” density and height while not being required to go through the process of property-by-property upzoning. Thus, developers are not spending time or money they would otherwise be required to spend, because this blanket up-zoning is occurring through Case No. 25-13.

Design Review

Design Review: The purpose of Design Review is to promote high-quality, contextual design, by allowing for review against specified criteria. The process entails a public hearing with review and approval by the Zoning Commission. Ex 3 at p 58,

This case began when OP released the Wisconsin Avenue Development Framework (Exhibit 3, August 7, 2025), which included Design Review for almost all the lots involved.

To achieve the urban design vision of this Development Framework, OP will work with property owners and developers whenever possible. It is recommended that Design Review, as currently described in the zoning regulations, be applied to the high-density

mixed-use areas covered by the proposed Friendship Heights Metro Zone and Tenleytown Metro Zone. The purpose of Design Review is to promote high-quality, contextual design, by allowing for review against specified criteria as identified in this Development Framework. The process entails a public hearing with review and approval by the Zoning Commission. The proposed Mixed-Use Corridor Zone and Friendship Heights Transition Zone could be developed as a matter of right. A PUD would also be an available option in all four zones. Ex 3 at p. 42.

A developer is extremely unlikely to request a planned unit development (PUD) within the context of the dramatic upzoning included here.

Briefly, during the consideration of this proposal, OP eliminated Design Review entirely but, in response to Zoning Commission concerns, Design Review was reinstated. Subsequently, OP, in response to developer testimony, again narrowed the application of Design Review. A hybrid version of Design Review was introduced by OP.

OP proposes 3 exemptions to Design Review

A development would be exempt from Design Review based on: (1) size of the lot; (2) whether the proposed use includes affordable units; and (3) whether the lot includes Historically Preserved elements.

Lot Size

The Office of Planning wants to exempt lot sizes smaller than 15,000 square feet (SF).

OP's initial draft incorporating design standards imposed no lot minimums. OP now states that it wants to limit the number of lots subject to design review in the interest of administrative efficiency. Design Review is supposed to ensure a unified street wall and appealing streetscape. Why does OP think that lots smaller than 15,000 SF would have "limited physical and operational impacts on the surrounding community"? OP's claim is not supported by any meaningful argument.

OP likens this concept to the 15,000 SF minimum requirement for Planned Unit Developments (PUDs) and says that the PUD threshold should apply to Design Review. OP then dismisses the possibility of setting the threshold for Design Review to 10,000 SF because it would double the number of reviewable projects.

Consider when bonus density and height are awarded here. Remember that the developer already has been awarded a great deal of increased height and density with the adoption of this rulemaking. By contrast, developers seek PUDs as a means to get these types of benefits – extra height and density. Usually, the developer offers some form of public or community benefit.

PUDs can be smaller than 15,000 sq. ft. and nevertheless require full PUD review. Thus, the PUD analogy falls and should not be the basis for limiting Design Review.

Further, a project on a small lot can have an outsize impact, as both the ZC and Board of Zoning Adjustment (BZA) know well from their experience, having reviewed many cases involving lots smaller than 15,000 SF. Those cases have involved unsightly pop-ups, rear additions, oversized decks, and many other proposals that demonstrate the impact that changes to a single-family house can have on its neighbors.

It is unfair to contiguous neighbors to exempt developers of less than 15,000 sq. ft. lots from Design Review. There is no evidence that contiguous neighbors of such lots would be less prejudiced and adversely affected than neighbors of larger lots. Lot size should not provide an exemption from Design Review oversight by the Zoning Commission.

PUD rules do not provide a precedent because PUDs and Design Reviews are fundamentally different processes serving different purposes.

The filing of a Design Review Application and providing relevant and required supporting information (see <https://dcoz.dc.gov/page/filing-design-review>) is not unduly burdensome on a developer, particularly in light of the large gift the developer is receiving by way of the major upzonings provided in ZC 25-13.

It is the Zoning Commission's role to serve the people who live in DC, including protecting neighbors from unacceptable, unsightly, and incongruous designs.

Affordable Units

OP proposes an exemption from Design Review for Affordable Developments.

The proposed exemption is in response to comments submitted by Somerset Development, a for-profit, mission-driven development company. We praise Somerset for its work. Somerset raised timing issues related to the Zoning Commission Design Review process and the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) Open RFP process for HPTF funding. Somerset must rely on certain public financing, including Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LITHC) and Housing Production Trust Fund (HPTF) gap financing loans.

The remedy to this problem is not to exempt affordable development from Design Review. It is to directly address the flexibility that DHCD should offer applicants for HPTF funds. The District Council should address this issue during oversight and budget hearings.

The Zoning Commission should not alter zoning processes because a mayoral agency, in this case DHCD, has administrative rules that may interfere with an applicant's complying with both the zoning process and DHCD rules.

In addition, Somerset claims that the cost of participating in the Design Review would be a burden, but fails to provide any cost estimates. This failure makes it impossible to evaluate any potential financial impact.

Design Review is in reality not a burdensome process. Design Review standards are minimal and should be addressed through exhibits that a developer would already have prepared for purposes of obtaining financing. It is unlikely that more time and money will be needed to meet the Zoning Commission Design Review requirements.

We welcome and support affordable housing. We believe, however, that Somerset, and all developers, including those providing affordable housing, have to be sensitive and supportive of the public interest regarding how a project fits into the existing neighborhood. Neighbors have a right to express concerns regarding the impact on their neighborhood.

A certain percentage of affordable housing should not result in an exemption from a process that has nothing to do with supplying affordable housing. Design Review has nothing to do with the type of housing units or who will live in the units. There is no reason to conclude that an affordable project will not present design issues any more than that a luxury housing project will not present design issues.

OP says that developments on Wisconsin Avenue can provide at least 33% affordable housing units in their projects. This is a refreshing development because, in a previous supplemental report, OP argued that it was unfeasible and uneconomic for developers to comply with higher set asides for affordable housing. OP stated that 18% was the limit per IZ+. Now OP says that developers could provide 33% affordable housing. Hopefully, this is a new day and 33% can be the requirement in the future for other new zones. This would be consistent with the Comprehensive Plan.

Policy 2503.3 of the Comp Plan recommends:

“ . . .to advance deeply affordable housing production, proposals that reserve at least one third (33 percent) of housing units as affordable to very-low- and extremely-low-income households for the life of the building in Future Planning Analysis Areas with high housing costs and few affordable housing options may proceed in advance of planning analyses. 2503.3 ”

Lots with Historically Preserved Elements

Design Review and Preservation Review are not the same. In Supplemental Report III, (Ex256), OP waived the Design Review requirement for sites designated as historical. Exempting lots with historically preserved elements from Design Review is illogical.

The fact that historic alterations are subject to a rigorous review by the Historic Preservation Review Board is not a reason to exempt these buildings from Design Review. The two reviews do not apply the same criteria.

Preservation review ensures that work on historic properties meets preservation standards and guidelines, and that such work is compatible with the buildings' historic character. This result is

accomplished through review of building plans, permits, and subdivision applications. Historic productions concentrate on the exterior of buildings, primarily exteriors that face the streets. Most often, building interiors have not been landmarked and so interior changes are not reviewed.

By contrast, Design Review by the Zoning Commission takes all areas of a building and its land into consideration, and is intended to promote high-quality contextual design of the entire building. The review includes examination of plats, site plans, circulation plans (including vehicular and pedestrian routes), landscaping and grading plans, elevations, and statements prepared by the builders.

Compliance with historic preservation requirements falls far short of constituting compliance with Design Review requirements. Historic buildings should receive both Preservation Review and Design Review.

Conclusion

Tenleytown Neighborhood Association strongly urges the Zoning Commission to reject the proposed exemptions from Design Review. Design Review for the upzoned 150 lots on Wisconsin Avenue would preserve and protect public input and participation. – a fundamental element of our democratic process.

Thank you for your consideration.

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