

Testimony before the D.C. Zoning Commission

In support of ZC No. 13-14 – Vision McMillan Partners & District of Columbia  
Multi-Family/Retail (Parcel 4) & Townhomes (Parcel 5)

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As a DC resident, living in Bloomingdale about half a mile from the site of the former McMillan Sand Filtration Plant, I am strongly in favor of VMP's planned redevelopment of the site and most aspects of the multi-family, retail, and townhome parcels.

At current growth rates, DC will reach its former peak population of 800,000 residents in just over ten years. Meanwhile, new housing production is extremely limited, and income and wealth inequality in the district continues to rise. The result is that, for people of low or even average income, finding an affordable place to live in the District is becoming harder every year. A recent report from George Mason University's Center for Regional Analysis notes that because of skyrocketing rents, real area income has *fallen* by 4% in the past four years even as nominal income has climbed 5%. If these trends continue, DC will no longer be a city for everyone; only the extremely rich will be able to live here.

To stop this trend, two things are needed: we must produce more housing, and we must protect housing prices for the city's most vulnerable residents by making affordable housing available, without segregating the poor into uninhabitable housing projects. With this Commission deciding to yet again delay a much-needed zoning code rewrite, which would directly address the housing crisis by enabling existing homeowners to provide accessory dwelling units, the only way to create additional housing is to build more homes. The VMP plan helps on both fronts, adding over 700 new units of housing as drafted, with 119 units of inclusionary affordable housing. Both of these will be extremely welcome additions to the city, and to my neighborhood, where house prices have jumped 10% in a year and rent is rapidly becoming unaffordable for people of modest income.

In addition, the retail portion of the developments, including grocery stores and restaurants, will ensure that both new residents, as well as residents of the adjacent communities, live in a thriving, walkable neighborhood. In particular, I am extremely excited about the development of a medium-sized grocery store on the site, as the plan calls for. The nearest grocery store to my house, the Giant at City Market, is just over a mile away; the VMP plan calls for a grocer just over half a mile from my home. The change is even more dramatic for residents of Channing St., who will see a 1.5-mile trip to the store turn into a quarter-mile jaunt -- within walking distance for nearly everyone.

I would like to see some changes; in particular, I agree with Vice-Chairman Cohen that the plan for a large block of affordable senior housing does not serve the needs of the city as expressed by the Housing Authority and the Office on Aging, and would like to see the senior housing replaced with general dedicated affordable housing. I would also like to see more deeply subsidized housing (as 20% of DC residents make less than a quarter of the AMI, so housing at 50% AMI is no better than market-rate housing for them). Such an expansion would necessarily include a commitment from the Housing Production Trust Fund to pay for the additional subsidized housing. I also think there is more parking in the rowhome and retail areas of the plan than is needed in this area of this city, and that less parking could help reduce costs.

However, no plan is perfect; and I recognize that while I might like to see some changes to the VMP plan, others might like the exact opposite. Almost any variation on the current plan will be far better for the District, for the surrounding neighborhoods, and for me and my fellow residents, than the current state of the McMillan site: a fenced-off, unsafe, inaccessible industrial waste site, which has served no purpose for any DC resident in three decades. I urge the Commission to approve the VMP plan expediently, to allow the creation of much-needed additional housing and allow this site to become a valuable, integrated part of DC's urban fabric.