

DC Zoning Commission
Testimony of Gwen Southerland
May 1, 2014

Good Evening Members of the Commission,

INTRODUCTION

My name is Gwen Southerland and I've been involved with the community aspects of the McMillan site for over 20 years. I am presently serving as a member of the *Friends of McMillan Park*, the *McMillan Advisory Group (MAG)*, and the predecessor *McMillan Park Committee*. I am also the elected president of the *Franklin Commons Tenant & Civic Association*. Previously I served as Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner for Single Member District (ANC SMD) 5C07, the ANC SMD in which the McMillan site was then located, for four years. In short, I am very familiar with community thoughts and feelings on McMillan and what the community wants to see there, and what it does NOT want to see there. Although the following comments will elaborate the specifics, this community has never wanted to see high rise buildings nor any other dense development that would unnecessarily tax our overburdened roads or take away too much of the wonderful historic and recreational resources we would like to see revitalized at McMillan. *The Planned Unit Development (PUD) proposal before you today, requesting as it does CR and C-3-C zoning, is unacceptably dense and is counter to the scale of development that I have learned over the years that the majority of the community can support.*

As far back as 1987, my first encounter with McMillan was to address the community's concern regarding the lack of maintenance at the site. It was overrun with trash, debris, tall grass and weeds, which even covered the sidewalks adjacent

to the site So for several years, before becoming formally involved with McMillan, my main efforts were to have the city clean and maintain McMillan The city has neglected McMillan and cut down the trees that still remained on the site when it was first purchased from the Army Corps of Engineers in about 1987. I am not aware of any maintenance the city has done to the property other than mow the surface grass since the original purchase, which is a shame, considering that much more of the tree plantings on the surface could easily have been kept and maintained

In 1990 as the city began its first attempt to re-develop McMillan, I was asked by Horning Brothers, to speak on their behalf, to endorse their plan for redevelopment of McMillan. However, as I began to speak with my neighbors about this plan and proposal, my ANC commissioner, Mary Barbour, and the Stronghold residents, who lived adjacent to McMillan, all expressed grave concern about the high density of the proposed plan and the impact that it would have on the quality of life for their neighborhood Those concerns continue to this day and for exactly the same reasons, and these concerns are still conveyed from the same families I knew back in 1990 as well as from many of the new residents. Stronghold has many families who have been in their homes for four and five generations, and strong feelings develop about the neighborhood during such an extended time

A few years later, developers *Greenhorne and O'Mara* held a series of meetings concerning a proposal for McMillan, however this too was a high-density, mixed-use plan, which was not supported by the majority of the community. Over the years, I have participated in meetings concerning all of the proposed plans for McMillan, including of course the present DMPED/VMP proposal.

From 1998 until 2002, I was the ANC commissioner for the McMillan site. As the ANC commissioner, I sponsored several single-member district meetings on McMillan, and, at the request of the constituents, many of these meetings centered on the historic nature of McMillan and the desire to preserve a good portion of the site for park and contiguous open green space (COGS), and to provide select, upscale retail consistent with the green space and historic architecture.

As the ANC SMD Commissioner, in the spring of 1999, I sponsored a ward-wide, all-day Community Summit and tour on the *"Restoration and Development of the McMillan Reservoir Park,"* in collaboration with the *School of Architecture at Catholic University*. At this event, we received many ideas for the community's use of McMillan, and community agreement coalesced around a limited development plan of housing and retail, leaving 80% of the site for contiguous open green space (COGS) for the park.

In December of 1999, ANC 5C (now 5E), issued a resolution at a public meeting, stating "ANC 5C goes on record to support historical preservation, park and open space, with limited development." This resolution (attached) was signed by the then ANC Chairman and the Recording Secretary.

In 2001 to 2002, the *DC Office of Planning (OP)* and the *Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD)*, conducted a series of comprehensive community meetings and all-day workshops in order to ascertain some community consensus for revitalizing McMillan. The scenarios for consideration ranged from low-density (open space), to moderate and high densities of development. The first VMP development plan met with the approval of a cross-section of the community.

From these workshops, according to the OP and DHCD *McMillan Sand Filtration Site. Summary of Recommendations for Site Revitalization*, dated February 2002, “many uses were found undesirable for the site” and specifically: “big box retail, high rise office, high rise residential, hospital/medical facilities and uses that require large amounts of surface parking” The list of desirable uses included park/open, recreation facilities, low-rise office, historic preservation, cultural facilities” These wishes of the community were no surprise to me then, and they are no surprise to me now, and the same objections we heard against high rise buildings and overly-dense development back then are echoed today with the PUD you have before you Why is this the third overly-dense development proposed to this community, when the community wishes are quite well known?

A neighborhood survey done by members of the McMillan Advisory Group and others two summers ago reflected exactly the same sentiments I have heard for years. An overwhelming majority of the 1,000 households visited wished to see significant park on the surface with creative reuses of the underground caverns, and some community-scale development consistent with the architecture and landscape to provide widely-sought community-scale development such as a grocery store, restaurants, a community meeting room, sports and recreation facilities, etc.

During my years of community service, I heard from many members of the community. Not all, but an overwhelming percentage of residents in Bloomingdale, Stronghold, and Park Place believed the plans to be too dense, both the current plan and the two previous plans.

For over 20 years, the collective voice has been, yes, they want McMillan to be developed, “tear down that fence,” but without the high-density. They’ve said, from the very beginning, that they want a park, a grand park, a destination park, a world-class park. They’ve said they want a grocery store, or an upscale farmers market. Retail has also been on their wish list—along with fine dining restaurants where they can “go for a great meal, and a glass of wine,” with friends and family.

Over the years, many have said that they would like to have recreational, cultural, and educational facilities, including a library, too. And to ensure the safety and protection of all, a police sub-station.

In sum, what this community wants is medium-density development, this is particularly within the spirit and intent of the Comprehensive Plan and within the scope of the development plans that were proposed by the DC Office of Planning in a series of community workshops that started in 2000 and culminated in the 2002 summary of recommendations. What the majority of the community does not want is the PUD you have before you. Please reject the requested CR and C-3-C zoning and consider only something consistent with the community wishes and the Comprehensive Plan.

As for housing, some residents have expressed the need for *affordable* housing, however, I don’t ever recall hearing any community resident express the desire for high-rise residential or office buildings, medical or otherwise.

The heart of what community has opposed for over 20 years and still opposes now, is any redevelopment plan for McMillan that includes a high-density component, particularly the height and placement of the buildings. New and long-

term residents, who live on North Capitol Street, NE, have expressed, loudly, that the city should revisit the original VMP plan, which placed the grocery store and all retail, on Michigan Avenue. These neighbors have for generations watched the sun set over McMillan Reservoir, Howard University's Founders' Hall, and the National Cathedral, with a majestic view of the Washington skyline, exactly as was intended in the 1901 McMillan Plan and Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.'s design for the park.

In direct contravention to the community's very clearly expressed desires, the District has for over 20 years only entertained redevelopment plans that called for high-density, mixed-use such as the plan presented before the Zoning Commission tonight. Why are the community's wishes, which are consistent with the Comprehensive Plan, with the poor transportation infrastructure of our neighborhood, and our wish to revitalize and revive this city-owned resource into something we can enjoy and be proud of, why are these things not taken into consideration when the city looks for specific development plans? Why not a competition to find what is suitable?

In closing, it should be noted that during the last four to five years, an intense community outreach program has instilled in the community that, "you take the redevelopment as proposed, or you get nothing." This is an insult to this community, our city, and the McMillan Plan. We can do much better than this and we must, for ourselves and the generations that follow us. We most certainly do not have enough park space in western Ward 5 to give historic McMillan Park away like this. Please consider the damage that granting CR and C-3-C zoning would do to this location and let us come up with something better. Thank you.