

Clare Salerno, Southwest resident

Written testimony in opposition to 5 M St. SW (VNO South Capitol, LLC & Three Lots in Square 649, LLC)

October 1, 2020

My name is Clare Salerno, and I have been a Southwest resident for just over one year, though I have worked in Southwest for a year and a half, and a resident of Washington, DC for two years. I am asking the zoning commission to reject this development (20-15; 5 M St. SW), unless or until the project design is an example of equity and inclusion per the Southwest neighborhood plan with 1/3 market rate, 1/3 workforce, and 1/3 deeply affordable units.

As both a Southwest resident and a housing researcher at the Urban Institute in Southwest DC, this development raises several concerns. Namely, this proposal does nothing to address the pressing housing affordability concerns in the District that have exacerbated gentrification, including displacement of Black residents, and homelessness in the district. We need housing that is actively addressing these issues, not contributing to them.

One thing I love about living in Southwest is the great economic, racial, and age diversity of its residents. Though Southwest has faced a long history of disinvestment, there is true potential for it to be a “model of equity and inclusion,” as is stated in the Southwest neighborhood plan. The Southwest neighborhood plan also states that Southwest residents “want new housing developments to offer varied products, especially units sized for families. Development pressures and potential gentrification were specifically considered a threat to the most economically vulnerable residents.”

I am concerned that development projects in the neighborhood such as this proposal are moving the neighborhood further away from, rather than towards, this noble vision. Notably, this development does set aside enough units as affordable or workforce housing. Instead, the building’s units are all market-rate, which prevents lower and middle income residents from being able to stay in Southwest as other property values rise, as well as low- and middle-income people moving into the neighborhood from other parts of the District, DMV region, or country.

Additionally, this development lacks adequate diversity of multifamily units. Three plus bedroom units are critical for ensuring that families can live in Southwest. Keeping people housed near their jobs is critical to a thriving society and economy, so it is critical to include more affordable and multifamily units.

The US is in the midst of an affordable housing crisis whose effects are being disproportionately felt by Black and/or low-income residents, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. We need developers to work with communities to ensure that developments are meeting residents’ needs and desires. This proposal does not adequately meet the affordability and unit-size sorely needed to prevent additional displacement of Black and low-income residents. I humbly ask the Zoning Commission to reject this development, at least until the project design is an example of equity and inclusion per the Southwest neighborhood plan with 1/3 market rate, 1/3 workforce, and 1/3 deeply affordable units. Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of this matter.