

Zoning Case: 20-18

Written Testimony: Adom M. Cooper

October 23, 2020

Dear Commissioners,

My name is Adom (A-d-o-m) M. Cooper and I have lived in SW since 2014, where I coordinate a mentorship program called DC MAAP and advocate with the resident group, SW Action. My SW DC connection goes deeper beyond 2014. My late great aunt, Joyce Mitchell Cook (1933-2014), was the first African-American woman to earn a PhD in Philosophy and called SW DC home for many years. Specifically, she lived in Tiber Island Cooperatives Homes up until the day she passed away. This neighborhood has undergone sweeping changes since my great aunt moved in and specifically more exponentially sweeping changes since she passed away. Many of these changes have not considered the entire human population of the area, have simultaneously benefitted white populations while denigrating non-white populations, and served up one of, if not the most gentrified areas in the country according many sources including the National Community Reinvestment Coalition. The development planned for 5 M Street SW is an example of such changes.

This written testimony is in opposition to the 1319 S. Capitol project on the grounds that it does not meet the goals of the Southwest Neighborhood Plan (SWNP). **My demand is simple: reject this development, unless/until the project design is an example of equity and inclusion per the SW neighborhood plan with 1/3 market, 1/3 workforce, and 1/3 deeply affordable units.**

While I appreciate that the applicant worked with neighboring properties, the Southwest Neighborhood Assembly to preserve and restore two townhouses into affordable units, and that the project includes twelve three-bedroom units, a rarity in the area, the greater context in which this project exists clearly illustrates that this project does not meet the requirements of the SWNP, nor a project receiving an Opportunity Zone tax break.

The SWNP specifically states the following:

- “Southwest will remain an exemplary model of equity and inclusion - a welcoming and engaged community that celebrates and retains a mix of races, ages and income levels and enhances well-being for all amidst neighborhood growth and change.
- They [residents] also 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.

- Southwest’s most defining characteristic is its people. Residents overwhelmingly expressed their desire to maintain the economic and racial diversity that makes the community so strong and vibrant.”¹

Despite the SWNP, Southwest residents have only seen gentrification and displacement. Since 2000, the median income has increased 110%, the median price of homes has increased 55% to \$417,750, the White population increased from 24% - 52%; the Black population decreased from 67% - 40%; and “most of the new residential buildings have primarily consisted of market rate 1BR units attracting more young professionals.”

To respect the stated aspirations of Southwest residents in how their neighborhood develops, the Zoning Commission should apply the principles of the SWNP to all projects, regardless of if they are subject to inclusionary zoning (IZ). Choosing to only assess projects that are subject to IZ provides a loophole for large swaths of the area to be excluded from the SWNP, and thus, the wishes of the community. It makes sense, then, that the Zoning Commission must apply the principles of the SWNP to all projects.

The application of the SWNP to this project clearly shows that it is not in compliance. Out of the 310 units in this project, only 24 will be “affordable,” amounting to 8% of the total units. 8% is the legal minimum in terms of IZ. Achieving the “minimum,” in any endeavor, is not exemplary. Achieving the minimum in regards to “affordable” housing, during an affordable housing crisis, in an area that has experienced almost unprecedented gentrification and displacement, and is situated within an Opportunity Zone, is unacceptable ethically, and an insult to the Southwest community who advocated for, and deserve much more.

In addition to not meeting the requirements of the SWNP, this project also does not adequately meet the goals of projects receiving tax benefits by being located in an Opportunity Zone (OZ). OZs are federal programs that provide tax incentives for investments in new businesses and commercial projects in low-income communities that are expected to, among other things, increase affordable and workforce housing.² While 24 units is more than zero, I do not believe 8% of the units being affordable, in the midst of an affordable housing crisis, meets the expectations set out by the program (please refer to Exhibit 21 for more on this issue).

The Mayor has stated a goal of 12,000 affordable units by 2025. What is the response from the Mayor’s office about the fact that this development started with one affordable?

¹ Southwest Neighborhood Plan, 4.

² <https://dmped.dc.gov/page/opportunity-zones-washington-dc>

How is that appropriate in the middle of an evictions crisis? This development is a perfect opportunity to attack the Mayor's stated goal, not contribute to the need for its existence. [According to a project conducted by the University of California using Google Street View to examine gentrification](#), Navy Yard is the most gentrified area in the country. They found that "the Black population of this tract decreased from 95% in 2000 to 24% in 2018. And the White population increased from 3% to 68%." If there is one thing that this area needs, it is not more market rate housing. Many buildings with current market-rate apartments that have come online within the last few years are offering two months free to try and move the units as many corporate clients (who have provided corporate housing to their employees or contractors) have left DC. These living spaces are currently empty. If the economics of the buildings were mandated in a different manner and not left to the free market, it would be easier to improve the collective livelihood of DC residents. Not just the transient population that many of these buildings and this current project have in mind and cater to.

Longtime residents continually pay the cost, tangibly and intangibly, for the focus on the transient population. My aunt Joyce paid the cost as her neighborhood drastically changed up until the day she passed away. As an African-American, she did not have a local hair salon within walking distance and currently there is not a local barbershop in SW or Navy Yard. My barber has a shop in NW. Too many decisions are made with future/potential residents in mind versus current residents who breathe SW air every day. Many of these new buildings feature a host of private amenities such as community spaces, culture and art classes, dog parks, gyms, and even food stores. Residents have their basic needs met within the building and never see the need to explore and engage with their surrounding community. This established a firm disconnect between different populations in a defined area. This is how food and transportation deserts become established. If everyone lives in a building like this, there is seemingly no need to establish and maintain community amenities such as community centers, gyms, public parks, etc. The spaces in these buildings are designed for young professionals who will stay for an average of five years and move away when they wish to expand their families, as it is too expensive to stay and the options are scarce. This would not occur with a mixture of **⅓ market rate, ⅓ workforce, and ⅓ deeply affordable units.**

In closing, the Zoning Commission must step-up and address the affordable housing crisis with a response appropriate to the level of the crisis by demanding more affordable units from projects. The idea that unaffordable, market-rate units will solve the affordable housing is not only inaccurate (please see Exhibit 19), but is also the opposite of justice. Justice dictates that historically underserved communities should receive priority. Relying on market-rate units to solve the problem caters to the rich and affluent at the expense of those most in need. Moreover, reliance on market-rate units is full of unknowns: How many unaffordable units does it take to create an affordable one?

How far will the price drop relying on market-rate units? How long will this take? What are those struggling on the margins supposed to do in the interim? Southwest residents, as well as those who have long sought justice, are relying on the Zoning Commission to do what is needed. What does the Zoning Commission have to lose by imposing more stringent requirements for affordable housing? Who is harmed by the Zoning Commission's refusal to act?

For the aforementioned reasons, I ask that the Zoning Commission require more affordable housing to be included in the project. Specifically, one-third should be market-rate, one-third should be workforce, and one-third should be affordable. This is about housing, but it is also about the economy, public safety, and national security. The decision is in your hands and do not take it lightly. The entire District is watching.

Thank you for your time and consideration.