

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is John McTague. I live on the 1400 block of Varnum St. NW. I write to express my support for the Dance Loft PUD, Zoning Case #21-18, and I hope those with the power to move it forward will support it, too.

I recognize that many of my neighbors feel differently and I genuinely respect some of their concerns. However, I think we need to consider this project in historical context. I also think we need to prioritize addressing the overlapping racial justice, housing, and climate crises we currently face, rather than prioritize preferences for particular building aesthetics and status quo parking arrangements.

I have a PhD in political science from University of Maryland. I am a tenured professor of political science at Towson University. I have taught a course on systemic racism every year for the past ten years. When you study systemic racism in the United States, what you learn very quickly is that housing, zoning, and land use policy are the linchpins anchoring systemic racism. Access to good schools, jobs, transit, parks, hospitals, clean water and clean air. Access to spaces that are not over-policed. All of that is housing policy. Efforts to prioritize “historic preservation” or “neighborhood character” instead of affordable housing is one very common example of how systemic racism operates through suppressing supply of affordable housing.

I live in a house that was once subject to a racial covenant, which means the homeowner was contractually prohibited from selling to someone with black skin. This is not ancient history. Family wealth generated from the ability to own a home in 1940 or 1970 has a direct impact on the wealth and opportunity of people living and breathing in our city today. This neighborhood used to have a lot more Black residents. When the economic benefits of owning a home in this neighborhood increased, those Black residents were pushed out and the complexion of the neighborhood changed.

When economically and politically powerful communities, especially those who are disproportionately White, fight the provision of affordable housing, they are engaging in a long history of systemic racism. I am **not** talking about intentional racism. But intentions really don't matter. Instead, I am talking about racist **outcomes**. This neighborhood, with its tree canopies, its access to parks, transit, and grocery stores, with its walkability score in the 90s, is precisely the kind of neighborhood where we should open our arms and welcome those who are otherwise shut out by exorbitant and growing housing costs. We should share in our enviable resources. If we do not; if instead we hoard our resources by limiting housing in a growing city, we ensure that racist and classist inequality will worsen. We ensure that affordable housing can only be built in communities without the economic and political power to fight it, which has the effect of concentrating disadvantages and deepening inequality. Are “historic preservation” of building heights and “historic” alleys more important than housing real, live people? In *this* neighborhood, where in June 2020, I saw 16th St. lined with White people holding up Black Lives Matter protest signs? The inescapable fact of the matter is, when we make it impossible to afford living in this neighborhood, we disproportionately harm Black lives.

One telling statistic that sums up the relationship between housing and opportunity is life expectancy. The life expectancy of someone who is born in Anacostia is in the low-to-mid 60s. The life expectancy of someone born in Ward 4 is in the low-to-mid 80s.¹ Twenty years of life based on where you are born and raised. Creating more affordable housing, quite literally, is a matter of life and death.

¹ <https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/how-long-will-you-live/65-ab44c931-07c1-4a01-84c1-c12bb9b7c78d>

While I sympathize with abutting neighbors who prefer not to have a large building in their shared alley space, it is obvious that the only way to increase the supply of affordable housing is through greater density. We cannot build affordable low-density housing as a practical matter. This means we have a choice between a large building with affordable housing or no affordable housing.

The twin crises of systemic racism and unaffordable housing are not the only stakes at play here. We are also at a crossroads when it comes to climate change. Neighbors who oppose this development would have us believe that the priority for the neighborhood should be making sure everyone can park their multiple private cars directly in front of their home on public streets. But street parking is not private parking. What's more, parking in this neighborhood is ample, especially compared to many other neighborhoods in NW DC. To put it bluntly, car-centric policy is climate change denialism. Please, let us build more housing on well-served transit routes like 14th St. We cannot afford to defer the provision of housing in the name of ceding public space to cars. Our public spaces should be walkable, bikeable, and rich in bus service and alternatives to private car ownership. The increased demand for bus service in our neighborhood that will come from increased population will be a benefit to all.

There are a couple hundred future residents who will benefit from this development. Their descendants will also benefit from their being able to live in this neighborhood. The ripple effects of that generational transfer of advantage are enormous. Those future residents can't be here to advocate for themselves. But I want those future neighbors. I want to live in a diverse, welcoming, vibrant, and pedestrian-friendly neighborhood. And, though our voices may not have been the loudest through the preceding months' community meetings, I know that many likeminded neighbors share my view that this project is more than welcome.

This development represents a promising step in the right direction. Denying this development would be a step backwards. Please use your position of authority to work towards greater inclusion.

Thank you.

John McTague
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