

It's Time to Reconsider "Great Weight"

No longer the "voice of the neighborhood," ANCs have become a platform for pushing a political agenda

During last week's hearing, Vice Chair Robert Miller accused parties in opposition of badgering "ordinary" ANC members.

It may come as a surprise to this commission, but the ANC members testifying in support in this case are not "ordinary." They are activists, affiliated with groups funded by developers and real estate interests who are pushing for universal upzoning, maximum height and density, and the abolishment of historic districts.

These days, at least in Northwest, the majority of ANC commissioners are in office not to serve the community but to have a platform from which to advance their land use agenda.

No chance of a fair hearing

The overwhelming majority of 1b and 2b residents who engaged with their ANCs on this issue are opposed to MU-10. They attended meetings, wrote letters, made phone calls, and even invited commissioners to their homes to discuss their concerns. With rare exception, it was like talking to a wall.

Meeting after meeting, commissioners went through the motions, giving the illusion of community engagement without actually engaging. There was little to no objectivity, compromise, or consideration. It was clear there was zero chance of getting a fair hearing.

When challenged as to why they vote against the majority of their constituents, they dodge with the same talking point: *"We are not the voice of the neighborhood -- we took an oath to represent the interests of all of DC."*

Ageism and accusations of racism

Another indicator that ANCs are no longer representing their neighborhoods: Constituents have been the subject of ageist remarks and accusations of racism from their own commissioners, simply because they oppose the map amendment. At one ANC meeting, when a longtime resident tried to express her concern about the impacts of a 120-foot building, a commissioner launched into an unprovoked rant about how "none of you are entitled" to air, light, view, garden, or other livability measures. Another commissioner described his constituents on social media as "rich, retired white people in houses" who are "transparently racist and classist." The chair of ANC 1b - who last week made an accusation of racism against a community group that opposes MU-10 - long hid her online comments from public view by keeping her Twitter account "private" until recent legal guidance by OANC advised against it.

ANC takeover

The original intent of the advisory neighborhood commission as the "voice of the neighborhood" is increasingly becoming nostalgia.

Special interests have been recruiting and running candidates - overwhelmingly white professional YIMBYs - for commissioner races. They have succeeded in installing majority voting blocs in several ANCs. Their success is not so much a reflection of public support as it is their ability to exploit the weaknesses in our electoral system -- low voter interest in ANC elections, uncontested races, vacant seats, and no meaningful oversight -- effectively turning ANCs into a lobbying arm and a governmental rubber stamp for developers and real estate interests.

Great weight should be reconsidered

The ANC is no longer a truly democratic institution - a loss to the communities they are meant to represent. Adding insult to injury is that "great weight" is given to their decisions by government agencies, like this commission, who assume they represent neighborhood sentiment based on a thorough and considered public engagement process - when the truth is, they are predetermined based on personal biases.

Special interests are not deserving of "great weight," and the ANC resolutions in support of MU-10 should not be mistaken by this commission as a reflection of the neighborhood's wishes.

During the January 18 hearing, Chair Anthony Hood said he was "troubled" at the lack of public engagement by the Office of Planning, calling it a "showstopper." The commission should likewise be troubled by the conduct of the ANCs in this case, as they, too, have failed the community. Their decisions to support MU-10 were, by all accounts, a fait accompli.