

The Committee of 100
on the Federal City



COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Agency Performance Oversight Hearing
Committee on Libraries, Parks, Recreation and Planning

Office of Planning

Thursday, February 9, 2012

Testimony of Suzette M. Hemberger

Hi, my name is Sue Hemberger and I'm here today to testify on behalf of the Committee of 100. I'm a member of that organization's Planning Subcommittee.

In general, our concern is that while we see lots of work on DEVELOPMENT coming out of the Office of Planning, we don't see nearly enough effort devoted to actual PLANNING.

I'll briefly focus on three contexts where this absence is most apparent: large tract development and public land deals, implementation of the Comprehensive Plan, and transportation.

With respect to large tract development and public land deals, what we're seeing is solicitations (RFPs, -Qs, and -EIs) substituting for planning efforts. Both the scale of these projects -- here I'm thinking of sites like the Southwest Waterfront, Walter Reed, Saint Elizabeth's East Campus, and McMillan -- and the fact that the city is the property owner should mean that our ability to shape land use in ways that further the public interest is at its greatest. Yet instead of operating from a position of strength, we're basically abdicating our power to private developers. It's almost as if DC government is so happy to get something done (and something big, given the size of these parcels), that we're squandering opportunities to do something great, something visionary, and we're settling for generic mixed-use projects with no more public benefit than a typical PUD.

At Southwest Waterfront, for example, we're essentially giving away acres of public land after providing a significant subsidy for infrastructure and development costs. At the same time, we've seen the alleged benefits of the bargain (rental income, affordable housing) whittled away. There's no reason that, in the context of a deal such as this one, we should be willing to allow the developer to assume the existence of a streetcar but not to integrate track and substations into the project's design, or to accept the relocation of this segment of the Anacostia Riverwalk Trail from the waterfront itself to Maine Avenue.

Careful planning, done prior to deal-making – prior to the choice of development partners, is key to making the most of these large canvas, potentially transformative development opportunities. Whenever you go into a negotiation not knowing what you want (when the other side certainly knows what it wants), you're unlikely to emerge with a very favorable deal. But that's consistently what we're doing.

Moving on to the issue of Comp Plan implementation, because Alma Gates has already spoken about the Zoning Regulations Revision efforts, I'll be relatively brief. If I were to sum up the logic behind the proposed changes it would be “make more development possible everywhere.” From a planning standpoint, the problem with this approach is that if you incentivize development everywhere, you've relinquished your power to steer it to the places where it will do the most good. Abstractly, the logic behind planning is that the market doesn't always produce the best outcomes from a public policy standpoint and that governments should therefore use their regulatory powers over land use to harness and channel market forces in order to serve the common good.

Those aspects of the Comprehensive Plan that embraced this model have largely been ignored – both generally and in the context of the ZRR. Two examples that come to mind are the infrastructural analysis and transit-oriented development.

For example, in the Comp Plan, the idea behind creating TOD zones was to steer TOD projects to underutilized stations and lines in neighborhoods where substantial and focused investment could have a transformative effect and where such investment was unlikely to occur without incentivization. Once a critical mass of projects was underway in one such neighborhood, development incentives could be relocated to focus on another neighborhood. By contrast, if TOD zones are mapped and incentives applied throughout most of the city simultaneously (which is what appears to be happening), we lose the ability to concentrate

redevelopment in areas where it's most necessary and beneficial and, crucially, we sacrifice the investment synergy that emerges through targeting.

In essence, we're putting our foot on the gas while taking our hands off the wheel. And that's not the best way to get where we want to go.

Finally, with respect to transportation, I'm going to focus on a specific planning process that is currently underway: the Maryland Avenue SW Plan. Members of our Planning Subcommittee who have been involved in this effort have been impressed by the work of OP's project manager, Joyce Tsepas, but find the scope of the study too geographically constricted. We feel strongly that, in order to realize the potential benefits of this planning effort, it is crucial that the study area should encompass the entire rail corridor as well as Virginia Avenue. The Office of Planning has the competence and the vision to do this planning effectively – the constraint here is resources. We'd like to see the Council earmark funds to expand the geographical scope of the Maryland Avenue Plan.

To sum this all up, unless we plan more and plan better we're at risk of wasting opportunities to build upon the strengths of this city and to address the many challenges it faces.