



The Committee of 100

on the Federal City



February 20, 2024

Dr. Amber Hewitt
Chief Equity Officer and Director
Mayor’s Office of Racial Equity
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Washington DC 2004

The Council Office of Racial Equity (CORE)
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Washington DC 2004

Dr. Hewitt and CORE:

Empower DC and the Committee of 100 on the Federal City ask that the Mayor’s Office of Racial Equity look into the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Economic Development (DMPED) and the Office of Planning’s (OP) compliance with DC’s racial equity policies in the case of the proposed upzoning of Square 0157, Lot 826 (1617 U Street, NW) and Lot 827 (1620 V Street, NW) from the MU-4 Zone to the MU-10 Zone. (Zoning Commission Case No. 23-02.) The land is currently owned by the DC Government. This has proven to be a highly contentious matter that has already consumed 20 hours of hearing time at the Zoning Commission. The case docket lists 630 exhibits as of the date of this letter. Because the zoning action is likely to result in legislation to surplus the public land, we are also referring this inquiry to the Council’s Office of Racial Equity.

In this case, the Zoning Commission has recognized five parties in opposition, including “Black Neighbors of 1617 U Street NW.” Jonathan Kirschenbaum from the Office of Planning (OP) is handling the applicant’s presentation as well as responses to questions raised by the Commission and the parties. The focus of our request is DMPED’s and the OP’s compliance with racial equity policies, particularly engagement with the Black neighbors living near the site.

In 2021, Mayor Bowser established the Mayor’s Office of Racial Equity (ORE), which is charged with developing a system to ensure policy decisions and District programs are evaluated through a racial equity lens. The ORE is identified in the Comprehensive Plan as one of the responsible agencies for implementing the new “racial equity lens” requirements. A primary goal of the Office is to create authentic, transparent, and community-centered engagement practices which prioritize racial equity and are sustained long-term as part of regular government

operations. More specifically, Goal 3 of the ORE' Racial Equity Action Plan is: "DC Government is committed to meaningfully involving the community in government decision-making processes and to strengthening community partnerships."

OP's Racial Equity Action Plan includes the same overarching goals established by the Office of Racial Equity and sets forth supporting actions that are specific to OP, including that OP is committed to meaningfully engaging community in government decision-making processes and strengthening community partnerships. OP states that the meat of its plan is "ongoing community engagement."

When asked whether any of the historic Black churches or Black civic organizations in the area were spoken to, Mr. Kirschenbaum said he was not aware of any such outreach. (January 8, 2024, Transcript for ZC Case 23-02, p. 175.) In fact, the Reverend Carlos Younger, pastor of Freedom Baptist Church, a predominantly African American Baptist Church located one block from the site, and which has been in the area for 50 years, stated that no meaningful outreach was conducted with his church. (Exhibit 619.)

As shown in the engagement log for Case No. 23-02, DMPED's community engagement was limited mostly to meeting with commissioners from the affected ANCs. The engagement log shows no outreach by OP. (See Exhibit 58.) Speaking for DMPED and OP, Mr. Kirschenbaum stated that the outreach log reflects the government's outreach. He acknowledged that U Street is a Black business corridor and admitted that DMPED and OP had not spoken to a single Black business organization about the text amendment, nor to any Black businessmen or businesswomen. Mr. Kirschenbaum further admitted that the engagement log reveals that, other than with the ANCs, they talked at most to 10 or 12 individuals, many on the day DMPED posted signs about the upzoning hearing. He also stated that he is not aware of any outreach to DC's Tenancy Advocacy Coalition. (January 18, 2024, Transcript for ZC Case 23-02, pp. 58-62.) Since the ANCs were supportive of the upzoning, the result is that DMPED and OP hardly talked to anyone that might oppose the unzoning. Significantly, Zoning Commission Chair Anthony Hood stated after hearing about the limited outreach that he was very troubled. In fact, he said that "he was thinking about postponing this [the hearing] and letting them [OP] go back and do their due diligence of outreach to the community." (January 18, 2024, Transcript for ZC Case 23-02, pp. 74-75.)

Based on this record, Empower DC and C100 ask the Mayor's Office of Racial Equity and the Council's Office of Racial Equity to review whether the community outreach conducted by DMPED and OP satisfied their community outreach obligations under the agencies' racial equity obligations.

Parisa Norouzi
Executive Director
Empower DC
parisa@empowerdc.org

Shelly Repp
Chair
Committee of 100
chair@committeeof100.net