

Greater Greater Washington

The Washington, DC area is great. But it could be **greater**.

GOVERNMENT

Testimony on the Office of Planning

by [David Alpert](#) • not yet posted

The Office of Planning has worked diligently over 4 years and hundreds of public meetings to develop a new version of DC's zoning code. Yesterday, I [posted on Greater Greater Washington](#) about the most significant changes. Reactions online voiced significant concerns about these new rules.

For example, numerous commenters expressed displeasure at the proposed new rule which would allow corner store type establishments in residential zones, subject to a great number of restrictions on hours, number of employees, trash, and quantity of other nearby businesses. Matthew Yglesias, a Ward 6 homeowner who writes the Moneybox economics column for Slate Magazine, [wrote a blog post](#) criticizing the new rules as well.

You've heard a number of objections to this rule today. But there is a big difference. Yglesias did not think the corner store rule shouldn't go into effect. Instead, he called it "too timid."

The commenters who weren't pleased with the rule were not opposed to the corner stores, but rather felt that limiting their hours to closing by 7 pm is too restrictive. [One Twitter response](#) linked to a [Far Side cartoon](#) which showed a new type of retail, the "inconvenience store," with all products on shelves too high to reach.

Yet another [expressed surprise](#) that corner stores in residential zones were illegal at all in the District; that comment's author hadn't realized that, perhaps because of their prevalence in historic neighborhoods like Georgetown.

Read these comments, and you would get the impression that we need substantially fewer zoning regulations. Read a few of the postings on some neighborhood listservs in Ward 3, and you might conclude that each individual change in the zoning code will bring mass destruction upon the neighborhoods of the District.

A blog's commenters are not fully representative of the residents of DC. Nor is a neighborhood listserv, nor the citizen Task Force advising on the rewrite, and certainly not the witness list at today's hearing. All, however, provide insight into one of many facets of the DC population and their views.

Decisions about the zoning rewrite should factor in input from as many residents as possible, even—or especially—those who can't attend an evening community meeting or a council hearing, and even those who don't read blogs and neighborhood listservs.

This zoning code will move DC forward in many ways. Or, in truth, it will actually move DC backward, but in a good way. The biggest changes in this zoning code actually return DC to policies it had before 1948, when our most treasured neighborhoods, like Capitol Hill, Georgetown, or Petworth grew into the form they have today.

Corner stores, garage apartments, alley dwellings, and buildings not surrounded by large parking lots are all characteristics of DC's most historic neighborhoods, which at a stroke the 1948 code made illegal. This code reverses that, and adds some

21st century touches like the Green Area Ratio.

However, I do think many elements of the current draft proposal are too timid.

The minimum parking requirements for nonresidential uses in residential zones, even low-density ones right near transit, are potentially quite destructive to our urban fabric as they have been for over 50 years.

The "corner store" rules should apply to more areas, even lower density zones and areas somewhat near commercial zones; should include performing arts uses like small theaters; and should include a path for the BZA to grant exceptions acceptable to neighbors and local leaders.

The right to add an accessory dwelling to one's home, proposed for the lowest density zones and already possible for high density ones, should also apply to the R3 row house zones.

I understand that in at least some cases, OP officials have met privately with various opponents of the zoning rewrite, and made specific changes to exempt some zones from some changes in an attempt to appease those opponents.

I have no objection to OP meeting with anyone who wishes to talk with them, though it's ironic to hear arguments that they are "not listening" when in fact they have given these opponents special listening opportunities and even made changes upon personal request. I would prefer to see OP propose a zoning rewrite which they believe is the best policy for the District and in harmony with the Comprehensive Plan, regardless of who may or may not oppose it. After all, we have hardly yet heard the views of most DC residents on these changes.

This hearing, of course, is about the performance of the Office of Planning, not the merits of the zoning code. I believe the staff on this project have handled its great complexity with aplomb, and if I have any complaint about the agency's performance, it only comes if and when they have felt restrained from putting forth the zoning code they believe to be right. Let them do so, and then let the Zoning Commission hear from residents and judge the merit of each proposal.

Thank you.

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