

Dionne Y. Brown

**Testimony to D.C. City Council
Committee on Libraries, Parks, and Recreation
Office of Planning FY11-FY12 Performance Oversight Hearing
February 9, 2012**

Councilmember Wells and members of the Council,

I greet you on behalf of the residents of the Bellevue neighborhood in far SW as Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner for SMD 8D07. I personally affirm that the Office of Planning has worked diligently in engaging the community during the implementation of the Bellevue Small Area Plan approved by the Council in March of 2010. I had the opportunity to participate in its formation during a series of working group meetings led by Ward 8 Planner Evelyn Kasongo from 2007 to 2009. She presented updates to the Plan to the full Commission at our regular meeting in March 2011.

Her presentation provided a firm springboard for me to launch my term as Chair of ANC 8D's Economic Development Committee. Commissioners, residents, and community stakeholders worked collaboratively over the past year to define what we thought would make our community more livable. It was a pleasure to be able to share in a city-wide conversation on livable communities with DCOP Director Harriet Tregoning during the inaugural meeting of your Travelling Book Club as we reviewed *Triumph of the City* by Ed Glaeser. Let us ensure that the principles of successful cities get implemented on both sides of the river.

It would be nice to say that all have embraced our economic development efforts favorably, but that would not be true. Ward 8 has struggled with a myriad of challenges for so long that many fear revitalization as being synonymous with displacement. Ms. Kasongo rebuilt momentum for community development in Bellevue and we are working together to return focus to the goals of our Small Area Plan. Her consistent presence has been a definite asset as she worked on the Small Area and Neighborhood Investment Plans from concept to draft, approval, and implementation. She deserves high marks for withstanding negativity, unfounded accusations, and downright abuse at times.

While well-established residents anticipate the appreciation of their home values, those on the economic margins fear they will not share in the progress of our community. Economic diversity was one of the features that made old Washington thrive. While affordable housing has been taken into consideration in the Bellevue Neighborhood plan, we must also provide housing for residents at different price points. My SMD in particular has a significant proportion of spacious single family housing that was built in the 50s and 60s. Unfortunately, there is not a lot of turnover in them. If we are to attract families and buyers who want to make long-term investments in the community, we must include housing stock that will attract and retain them.

The prospect of Bellevue rising from more challenging times to the thriving community it once was is very exciting. As a native and life-long Washingtonian, I remember when streets were safe, neighborhoods across the city were more livable, and businesses were integrated into the fabric of each of them.

Bellevue once had two major grocery stores, a drug store, movie theater, ice cream parlor, and a fine restaurant. We have none of them now. My neighbors have regaled me with stories of how their children played freely, most of their consumer needs could be met within walking distance, and how couples used to parade down to South Capitol Street for evenings of dinner and dancing 30 to 40 years ago. Now, they have to drive to other areas to do just about everything. We really need the city's assistance in branding our community as a wonderful place to live and do business. Our demographics don't tell the whole story.

Construction will begin on a public parking garage by the end of the year, which will service forthcoming commercial office tenants, retail customers, and residents. We are excited that a liquor store will not return to the 4000 block of South Capitol Street. This was very deliberate as there are two others within a one-block radius. One of the anchors of the center will house a much-needed full-service four-story primary care medical building. Community of Hope, who will own and operate the medical building, is also relocating their administrative offices from DuPont Circle to this facility. Trinity Plaza is also being developed in the 3900 block of South Capitol Street as another mixed use project, where MVM Technologies will house its administrative offices. These are great signs that we are on our way.

Bellevue is one of the best-kept secrets in Washington. Our location off the southernmost exits off 295 makes us less than a ten minute drive to downtown, Capitol Hill, Old Town Alexandria, and the National Harbor. Bellevue also has a major commuter corridor in South Capitol Street, which carries traffic from Southern Maryland. We are also hoping the development of the Department of Homeland Security on the campus of St. Elizabeths will produce positive externalities in the form of jobs and other economic activity. However, we also are wary of the traffic implications as there is a two-lane bottleneck on I-295 between exits 1 and 2 that are not being widened despite the expectation of thousands of new commuters through our neighborhood.

Developers have informed me of coming close to deals, only to have them fall through. Businesses are still not comfortable investing east of the river. I have seen the city incentivize in other areas and implore you to continue the job in Bellevue. We need to ensure that it is restored and send the message that we value all neighborhoods throughout the city. I appeal to you to enable the Office of Planning to continue helping us in the way they have helped the other eleven strategic areas across the city identified for revitalization.

I would like to commend the role the Office of Planning played in organizing and executing the Ward 8 Economic Development Summit. Stephen Rice, East of the River Planner ensured that residents like myself were involved on both the front and back ends. What will become of the findings has been a consistent concern throughout the community. The vision was part pie-in-the-sky as public funding and market constraints continue to limit development and commerce.

On a final note, I would like to mention their inability to support redistricting task forces across the city as well as they could have due to insufficient licenses available to support each Ward. Although I was not a member of the Ward 8 Task Force, I attended several meetings and helped draft my Commission's SMD boundaries. We used 20th century means in year 2011. Software is available widely to map and calculate adjustments to boundaries. Although the agency has it for its workers, it was not available for community use. Consequently, redrawing boundaries and distributing population evenly was more onerous than it had to be.