

Sara Green

**Testimony, Committee on Libraries, Parks, Recreation and Planning
February, 9, 2012 Oversight Hearing**

My name is Sara Green. I have lived in the Takoma Park Historic District since 1975, at 7106 Piney Branch Road, NW. I am the Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner for 4B01 and the Chair of Advisory Neighborhood Commission 4B. However, I am representing myself today and am not speaking on behalf of ANC 4B.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify about two of the most important agencies to the Takoma community.

The Office of Historic Preservation

1. New Development Can and Should Be A Better Neighbor To Historic Homes

There is nearly unanimous agreement from HPRB Board members, staff and neighbors that mistakes were made in approving several new projects built in the Takoma Park Historic District several years ago. These projects don't work with their historic neighbors.

Now we have another building boom with four buildings totaling approximately 400 multi-family and mixed-used units either approved for construction, under construction, or in the process of approval by the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB). Note: Four hundred units may not seem like much for you downtown folks, but in Takoma, it's a big deal.

These are *all* projects that the community, including those who own neighboring residential properties, wanted to support. They develop ugly and blighted lots.

However, two of the mixed-used projects to be built near the city line on Carroll, between Maple and Cedar, are too big and as I put it, "don't respect" the adjoining historic homes. The latest project, 231 Carroll, was approved in 2011. It will tower over two of the loveliest historic homes in our historic district, both on Cedar Street, NW.

The design guidelines in the Comprehensive Plan call on developers to "[e]stablish gradual transitions between large-scale and small-scale development" such as single-family homes, not just in historic districts, but citywide. (Policy UD-2.2.4) This policy is especially important in historic districts.

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Unfortunately, in reality, the rear of 231 Carroll where the impact on these two exceptional homes is greatest, steps down only very slightly, with a minimal benefit to the homes. The way I see it, the Comp Plan guideline was not met.

This project was rushed. There were only about two months from the time the community first met with the developer until Board approval. This is a building that could have been much better and more time would have made it so.

I give HPRB good marks for its recent decision on Spring Place, NW. This 140-unit project is still under review by the community and HPRB. But in this case, HPRB is asking the developer to make revisions consistent with recommendations from neighbors, ANC 4B and Historic Takoma, Inc. and we're looking forward to seeing the proposal. The additional Board and staff review is making a difference in the quality of this project and in the community's support for new development.

Right now, zoning amendments are being written with a significant impact on historic districts. Please help ensure that new development in historic communities protects their character by strengthening, not weakening the new zoning requirements.

2. Demolition By Neglect

It is my understanding that DC has a "demolition by neglect" law but no adopted regulations. Therefore, we have no way to enforce the law. If that is still true, that is unconscionable.

We have several key historic properties in Takoma that are literally falling apart. A developer will have to restore several bungalow homes near Maple and Carroll Streets, NW *when he builds the project* approved by the city several years ago. Meanwhile, these houses have holes in the roof and are deteriorating more each day. We have been told that there is nothing the City can do to protect these historic resources until the developer builds.

3. OHP Architectural Review Of Permits Needed Before Construction

When HPRB approves a project, particularly large residential and commercial buildings, they are approving a design that depends on scores of details, including

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exterior materials, windows, and specific colors for all exterior elements. This is different than the zoning and other code reviews performed by DCRA.

Who makes sure that the design that HPRB approves is the design that gets built? We hope that there is a qualified Office of Historic Preservation staff member who signs off on every building permit after a thorough and detailed analysis for conformity to the approved design. This is a full-time job for at least one trained architect.

I have been told that the Office of Historic Preservation has recently hired such a person. I am asking that you mandate these reviews and require that the Office of Historic Preservation report its formal process and keep detailed records.

It is also very difficult for a citizen to see what the design the Board approved. I have looked at the Office of Historic Preservation staff files for projects approved in Takoma and found different drawings included for the same building but with no clear visual or narrative record of what the approved design looks like or the approved materials.

Please note that I have not reviewed DCRA's files, but this information needs to be completely and accurately maintained by the Office of Historic Preservation and available to residents.

4. ANC Notices

HPRB has a different system than the ABC Board or the zoning boards or others for notifying Advisory Neighborhood Commissions about its agenda and this should not be the case.

Instead of the 30 business days' notice required by law, HPRB issues a preliminary agenda early in the month and then a final agenda about ten days before its monthly hearing. Often an item on the preliminary agenda does not end up on the final agenda.

As a concession to these problems, HPRB gives ANCs an automatic one-month deferral if more time is needed. While better than nothing, the deferral is not the answer.

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This system makes it very difficult for ANC's to meet with developers and communities and present quality recommendations in a timely manner. Remember, ANC's only meet once a month also. Often the applicant does not initiate contact with the ANC, so when we see an item on the preliminary agenda, it is the first time we hear about it. We have to scramble to schedule meetings within a short timeframe, then we learn the item isn't going to be heard that month anyway.

It's a needlessly confusing and inappropriate system for working with volunteer elected officials. Please require that HPRB give ANC's 30 business days' notice. Everyone, including builders and the community, will benefit from a more uniform and predictable schedule.

The Office of Planning + *Econ. Develop.*

1. The Office of Planning and the Office of Historic Preservation belong in separate departments from economic development. They should be independent from the pressure to generate tax revenue.

Please work to accomplish this goal.

2. Walter Reed is one of our most important opportunities to "get it right."

However, the recent planning process did not include adequate public participation.

Despite the large number of public meetings held, the public had very little opportunity to examine the details of the proposal and comment before the Walter Reed Local Redevelopment Authority (LRA) Committee voted. At least one key document was unnecessarily labeled "confidential." It was released only after repeated requests. A key meeting was closed to the public.

The transportation plan which will support roughly 2 million square feet of development is sketchy.

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Two Walter Reed LRA members are still waiting for a good explanation why the city may have to effectively pay twice for one site, Building 18, when this building, along with others, will be part of the land the city receives from the Army.

And the all-important implementation process is still not clear.

A city with recent examples of corruption and bad management needs to ensure that when it handles a very high-value land deal, both the perception and the reality of fair dealing are met.

Please be very careful before adopting an implementation process for Walter Reed.

Thank you for considering these recommendations.