COALITION FOR SMARTER GROWTH

Oversight hearing regarding the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development

Before the Hon. Harry Thomas, Jr., Chairperson
Committee on Economic Development

by Cheryl Cort, Policy Director
February 24, 2011

Please accept these comments on behalf of the Coalition for Smarter Growth. My organization works to ensure that transportation and development decisions in the Washington, D.C., region accommodate growth while revitalizing communities, providing more housing and travel choices, and conserving our natural and historic areas.

I have dealt extensively with the office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development in land dispositions and the implemenation of Inclusionary Zoning. I would like to offer a number of comments focused on the process of public land dispositions. I was deeply involved in the process to give a parcel to a private developer in downtown Ward 7 at Minnesota Ave. and Benning Road and have been involved in others to a lesser degree.

Whether DMPED continues to be the chief manager of disposing of public property or development corporations are created, I believe that my concerns are germane to improving the outcomes of these redevelopment efforts. Overall, I urge DMPED and development corporations to collaborate much more closely with Office of Planning (OP) and Department of Transportation (DDOT) to ensure the best design and transportation approach and respect for community plans. DMPED needs to recreate a spirit of maximizing the public good and utilizing all of the best expertise in the District Government to craft public-private partnerships. These deals need to be feasible for the private sector, but most importantly must accomplish priority goals for the public.

The lack of transparency in decision-making is an overarching problem. How does the public know we are getting a good deal for the sale or giving away of our land? Government loses its leverage to negotiate the very best deal without public review of the priorities and benefits sought on any parcel. Unfortunately, DMPED has rarely provided sufficient information to the public to explain. We need a transparent process that provides substantiated assessments of the land value and a clearly quantified delineation of the value of the public benefits. There are many cases of concern; one of them is the Southwest Waterfront deal. In this case, the developer was able to change the agreement with the city a number of times and cap the amount of affordable housing set aside. All this occurred years after competing with half a dozen proposers to win the deal. Changes to the agreement were made out of public view inside DMPED, or rushed through the Council. Major changes to land development agreements, and disposition of public land should never be done on an emergency basis. Disposing of public land should be a deliberate, transparent process.

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Some additional suggestions:

- Urban design – Building urban places with lasting value requires quality urban design and attention to details. It also requires building mixed use environments. Design review with Office of Planning or an OP design review board could greatly assist in ensuring quality design.

- Parking – The city has wasted untold tens of millions of dollars tied up in unnecessary car parking for both residential and commercial development. With more than one third of all DC households not owning a car, and essentially all households living within a 5 minute walk of a transit line, we should not accept suburban parking standards for our city. It's tremendously wasteful and ignores the key advantages of our great urban assets – Metro, major bus service, and extensive walk and bicycle access. OP and DDOT are now helping the city rethink parking and transportation approaches to our urban places. Strategic redevelopment projects must recognize the low rates of car ownership (in many neighborhoods half the households do not own a car); the access to transit, walk, and bicycle options; and in the case of affordable or senior housing, even lower rates of car ownership. The city must rethink sinking millions of dollars into too much car parking that is of questionable utility and unquestionable cost. Instead, a more strategic approach to right-sizing parking will increase affordability and allow more resources to be allocated to improving access through better walk and bicycle facilities, transit, and alternatives to subsidized parking and driving such as discounted transit passes, Zipcars, taxi vouchers, and delivery services. There are many appropriate alternatives to building too many parking spaces at $25,000 to over $40,000 a space. Again, I urge DMPED to collaborate with OP and DDOT. These agencies have developed substantial expertise in this area and can help make redevelopment more feasible and deliver more benefits.

- Public benefits & affordable housing – D.C.'s Comprehensive Housing Strategy should be a leading consideration when evaluating the merits of public land redevelopment. A top priority for city land development deals should be the leveraging of its limited land and financial resources to create and sustain housing for those D.C. families with the greatest need. District owned land is one of the few opportunities to create new housing for families earning 30 percent of Area Median Income and serve those who require additional assistance to be successfully housed.

- Community plans – DMPED should use community plans to guide development decisions on public parcels. Over the last few years OP and DDOT have created a large number of important community plans. Examples include the Minnesota Avenue Great Streets Plan and the Brookland Small Area Plan. In the case of a public parcel at Minnesota Avenue and Benning Road, a key street connection recommended in the Minnesota Ave. Great Streets Plan was essentially ignored by DMPED, wasting an important opportunity to alleviate a highly congested intersection, and improve access to the Metro station. By giving OP and DDOT more prominent roles in the review and decision-making process, these problems can be avoided early on.

Inclusionary Zoning implementation – lastly I wanted to mention the high level of professionalism that DMPED has put in place through DHCD's administration of the Inclusionary Zoning program. After much delay, we are pleased to have the program in place with skilled and attentive staff. Once the market recovers, IZ will be a major supply of workforce housing.

Thank you for your consideration.