

Organized March 5, 1910 - Incorporated May 31, 1940  
**Federation of Citizens Associations  
of the District of Columbia**  
P.O. Box 60622  
Washington, DC 20039  
100 Years of Service to the community

The District of Columbia Council, Committee of the Whole  
Oversight Hearing on the Performance of the Office of Planning  
February 16, 2011

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman. My name is George Clark and I am here to testify on behalf of the Federation of Citizens Associations and its more than 35 organizations from across the City. I am a past president of the Federation, a current board member, and a member of the Zoning Revision Task Force. The Federation celebrated its 100th anniversary last year and has long been a leading umbrella organization on issues affecting the city.

The principal reason I am here is to answer a question that has been posed by the Chairman of the Zoning Commission, Mr. Anthony Hood, on more than one occasion. He has asked "why aren't more citizens testifying at the Zoning Commission about these critical issues?" The answer is relatively simple. Despite the hundreds of meetings you will hear about from the Office of Planning, most citizen groups have no idea what is happening with the zoning revision and have no idea how to participate in it. There are several reasons for that, which I will go into shortly.

But suffice it to say that because of the lack of citizen participation at Zoning Commission hearings, the Chairman and other members have suggested that OP needs to hold city or ward wide meetings to discuss where things are and that the Commission itself should hold an omnibus meeting so that people can comment once the pieces of the entire project are woven together. There is no indication that OP will do so.

So how could this be necessary even after the many many meetings that have been held on particular subject matters? I have been at more of those meetings than most people and can tell you why. Many of us on the Task Force have been saying the same thing for at least 2 years.

The simple reason is that the meetings have not been held for the purpose of discussing individual problems or solutions with the existing zoning code. At the very first meeting of the Task Force in November 2007 I asked to have the list of problems with the zoning code that OP had compiled be distributed to the Task Force members. Although I was promised that list innumerable times, it has never been produced. The reason is that OP is totally unconcerned about deficiencies or improvements in the current zoning code. Its goal is to rewrite the zoning code essentially from scratch, with the goal of making the City "higher, tighter, and denser." Anything inconsistent with that goal never makes it into the discussion.

So here is what happens. A meeting is held and OP makes a presentation on what it thinks should be done, sometimes describing a problem, sometimes not. Those in attendance at

the meeting, which may be the first of 5 or 6 on a particular subject, will make comments and discuss the situation. At the end of the 5 or 6 meeting process OP will present its conclusions. Those conclusions almost always are identical to the presentation it made on the first evening. In other words, citizens in attendance can make comments, suggest changes, and even say what they think is wrong with the OP proposals, but those comments, changes and criticisms never make it into the report of the Working Group. Instead the Working Group report will say that there was a series of meetings, and that at the end everyone agreed with the OP proposal.

You can see why this would discourage those in attendance. This is not a problem that is limited to OP. Kristina Ford, the former chief planner for New Orleans, has just written a fascinating book entitled *The Trouble with City Planning*. In the book she describes what she finds as a common fault of planners when they hold community meetings. She says that too often the planners do not look for real alternatives but rather present their solution and then hold meetings and at the end of the meetings say that the community supported the solution. As she points out, most often this means that no real input from the community is ever listened to and the result of the sessions is preordained. That is exactly what has happened here.

Let me give a very concrete example. I participated in the Working Group meetings about height. In those meetings there was remarkable agreement among developers and citizens on certain issues. Despite that agreement, when OP issued its report that agreement was nowhere to be found. When the Height Working Group report went to the Task Force, the Task Force members again were in agreement that OP should not try to interpret the height act within its

proposed regulations. Despite the strongly expressed preferences of both the Working Group and the Task Force, when the regulations went to the Zoning Commission, OP continued to try to interpret the Height Act within its proposal. The Zoning Commission requested that OP remove those interpretations from the proposed rules. When the height issue again came before the Zoning Commission, OP had failed to remove those provisions.

A similar thing has happened with respect to what I will call the "chicken" issue. Two years ago on the morning before the oversight testimony I was told that OP's proposal to allow chickens to be raised throughout the city had been dropped. Since that time cities that had adopted such proposals have run into exactly the problems that many on the Task Force told OP were inherent in the proposal. Nevertheless, it appears that "a chicken in every yard" is back in the proposed regulations.

The zoning revision is a difficult job. The problem is that OP has proceeded as a Lone Wolf, ignoring input from citizens and developers alike to make fundamental changes in the way we live in Washington. There is no mandate for OP to make such changes. It is time for this express train to a "higher, tighter, and denser city" to have the emergency brakes applied.

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