

Your Voice Is Needed!

A Presentation by Caroline Petti to the Brookland Neighborhood Civic Association

A little over six months ago we talked about DC's Comprehensive Plan. Tonight I want to bring you up to date on where things stand.

But first a bit of refresher.

You'll recall the Comprehensive Plan is a compilation of maps and policies that provides a detailed depiction of the desired physical development of Washington, D.C. Some of the contents are general and applicable to the city as a whole. Some are quite specific, down to the neighborhood level.

Since a city is never static and to accommodate change, every 5-10 years or so, DC's Office of Planning undertakes a process for amending the Comprehensive Plan. Such a process is now underway.

The Brookland Neighborhood Civic Association has been participating in this process. You'll recall that last June (6/18) we sent in a set of six proposed amendments:

1. Protect the Brookland Green - To reflect the deal struck thanks to Councilmember McDuffie to protect the Brookland Green as community park space.
2. Mitigating Truck and Through-Traffic – Analogous to language in current plan that applies to Capital Hill.
3. Encourage family-sized affordable housing
4. Change the Future Land Use Map to eliminate industrial land mapped north of the Metro and along the tracks south of Girard. This signals that land-use changes are preferred, but it would take a subsequent re-zoning process for anything to change.
5. Add several historic sites to section regarding protecting historic resources: Masonic Lodge at corner of 12th & Monroe, Howard University School of Divinity & Sherwood Farmhouse, former MPD building at 17th & RIA, St. Joseph's Seminary. These are all widely acknowledged as deserving of historic protection.
6. Build a Pedestrian/Bicycle Bridge across the train tracks at Hamlin Street for safety and connectivity.

Well, so did literally thousands of others and OP is now struggling mightily to digest them all.

In the meantime, earlier this month (2/2/18), OP released a red-line/strike-out of the Framework Element of the Comprehensive Plan. The Framework Element is very important because it provides the foundation for the more specific and detailed elements of the rest of the plan and, as important, it addresses the Maps that are part and parcel of the Comprehensive Plan.

There are two main Maps associated with the Comprehensive Plan:

The Generalized Policy Map which assigns land use categories to different parts of the city. For example, most of Brookland is in the category called “Neighborhood Conservation Area.” Our 12th Street shopping corridor is in the category of “Main Street Mixed Use Corridor”.

The other main Map is the Future Land Use Map. The FLUM assigns the densities of various land uses – like low, medium or high density, residential, commercial, or industrial. The subsequent zoning of an area flows from the FLUM.

These two Maps, in conjunction with Comprehensive Plan text and approved Small Area Plans are used to guide land use decisions in the city. They carry legal weight and when land use decisionmakers like the Zoning Commission or the Board of Zoning Adjustment review development proposals, before they approve them they must ascertain and demonstrate that the proposals are not inconsistent with these documents.

This all sounds very dry, but if you care about the built environment around you, and the not built environment – the parks and the would-be parks; if you care about transportation and commuter options, housing, history, or quality of life then you should care about the integrity of the Comprehensive Plan.

OP is proposing changes to the Framework Element including the Generalized Policy Map and the FLUM, that are very problematic. Nearly all of the OP changes set the stage for denser and higher Matter-of-Right growth and nearly all are tilted in the direction of eliminating the clarity, predictability, and enforceability the Comprehensive Plan now offers.

For example:

1. In the GPM, most of Brookland is categorized as a “Neighborhood Conservation Area” where the guiding philosophy is first and foremost to conserve. OP proposes to change that and put development more on a par with conservation.
2. Another example: OP proposes to increase the density and possible uses now found in the current FLUM definitions. Nearly all of Brookland is defined as “Low Density Residential”, that is single family detached and semi-detached housing with front, back and side yards. OP adds new text to indicate that that use need not exclusively be the case. Likewise for “Moderate Density Residential” which characterizes some of the homes between Turkey Thicket and the train tracks.

Anywhere that the FLUM density definitions specify height limits, OP strikes them. For example:

3. Brookland’s 12th Street is characterized as Low Density Residential/Commercial. OP proposes to strike the current reference to one-to-three story buildings and replace it with up to 50 feet Matter-Of-Right or taller when approved as part of a Planned Unit Development.

Moderate Density Commercial – Around the Brookland Metro & north/Shopping Center along 10th St. - OP proposes to strike “generally do not exceed five stories” and replace it with generally ranging up to 50 feet in height and may be taller when approved as a PUD.

Medium Density Commercial – Between Rhode Island Avenue/train tracks/10th to Brookland Press Apartments – OP proposes to strike “generally do not exceed eight stories” and replace with “generally ranging up to 90 feet MOR and may be taller when approved as part of a PUD”.

4. Then, at every turn OP proposes to strike and add text to make the Plan and Maps more vague and less definitive. “Shalls” are changed to “shoulds”. Declarative sentences are removed. “Definitions” are turned into “examples”. The word “generally” – as in “generally speaking” – is added everywhere. Loopholes are added. Everything is made more subjective and infinitely more open to debate and interpretation.

On top of these OP changes to the Framework Element are a slew of changes proposed by prospective Brookland developers.

To give you an idea, the Menkiti Group is proposing to increase the density of building at the 901 Monroe site, up Monroe Street to 12th Street, and all along the length of 12th Street from RIA to Michigan.

WMATA is proposing to increase the density of building around the Metro including the area that they promised would be preserved as the Brookland Green.

The Franciscan Monastery is proposing a higher density change for all its property. As is Howard University for its Divinity School site. And, the St. Joseph’s site, as well.

Attached is a list of all the changes proposed by prospective Brookland developers. Others are likely as the amendment process unfolds. The president of BNCA will want to go over each of these at a future meeting. My purpose in bringing them up this evening is to illustrate that changes to the Comprehensive Plan can hit very close to home. They’ll affect the built environment of our neighborhood and the quality of life that led most of us to choose to live in Brookland in the first place. And, perhaps most importantly, they’ll affect the role that we as ordinary residents get to play in how these decisions get made.

Our main focus at this point in time should be convincing OP that its proposed changes to the Framework Element are ill-advised.

Your Voice is Urgently Needed! Contact Ward 5 Councilmember Kenyan McDuffie (kmcduffie@dccouncil.us) and At-Large Councilmembers Grosso (dgrosso@dccouncil.us), Silverman (esilverman@dccouncil.us), Bonds (abonds@dccouncil.us) and Robert White (rwhite@dccouncil.us). Sign up to testify before the DC Council on Tuesday, March 20th at 2:00 PM by contacting cow@dccouncil.us or calling Sydney Hawthorne at (202) 724-7130.

