

COALITION FOR SMARTER GROWTH

July 13, 2009

Hon. Mary Cheh
Chair, Committee on Government Operations and the Environment &
Hon. Kwame Brown
Chair, Committee on Economic Development
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Suite 317
Washington, D.C. 20004

RE: PR18-0314: Ensure sufficient public benefits in the Minnesota Avenue-Benning Phase 2
Redevelopment Disposition

Dear Committee members:

Please accept these additional comments regarding the surplus and disposition of the city-owned property at the northwest corner of Minnesota Avenue and Benning Road NE. We restate our support for the redevelopment of this property to fulfill the community vision for Downtown Ward 7 articulated in the 2008 Deanwood Strategic Development Plan and the Minnesota Avenue Great Streets Plan, and the 2005 Downtown Ward 7 Vision Plan, which my organization helped create.

High quality urban design & public benefits needed for Downtown Ward 7 site

Given the economic and financial climate, no development projects are moving ahead quickly. This gives us the opportunity to ensure that the city use its property for the right kind of development at this critically important intersection. This is the most prominent intersection in Downtown Ward 7. We should insist on a high quality project with sufficient public benefits. This site is too important to Downtown Ward 7 to settle for a project that provides too few public benefits or lacks high quality urban design and appropriate mix of uses.

We request that any resolution on declaring the property surplus or allowing for its disposal to a new private owner guarantee the following public benefits.

- Allocation of commercial space for one or more of the following: art galleries, other arts uses, non-profit organizations, other community institutions or quality childcare center.
- Sit down restaurant(s) with table service; outdoor café space.
- Retail including one or more of the following: bookstore, florist, bakery/coffee shop, clothing & accessories, furniture & home furnishings, specialty/organic food store.
- Compliance with the Minnesota Avenue Great Streets project streetscape design for all sidewalk improvements from building face to the street.
- Reservation of a public right-of-way or easement at the rear of the property so that a future street connecting on the north side of the Benning Road viaduct can be constructed. The resolution should exclude the following lots & squares: Lot 806, Parcels 176/83, 176/78. These lots can be viewed as exchanged for the public alley proposed to be transferred in this agreement.
- Building design, configuration and uses that address the context of the high traffic volume

intersection by placing commercial space, public plazas or other uses to buffer residences from the Benning Road viaduct and give a public orientation to the prominent corner.

- Public art that complies with Minnesota Avenue Great Streets plans.
- Overall compliance with the Great Streets plans and Deanwood Strategic Development Plan.

Reconsider townhouses lining Benning Road viaduct

Recent plans by Donatelli place a row of townhouses lining the Benning Road viaduct. While these townhouses were added to address the request that the project provide more homeownership units, we are deeply concerned that the placement of these townhouses next to the bridge is the wrong approach. We request that the Council reexamine this proposal – first by requesting current proposals and drawings be provided to the Council and the public before any action, and second, by assessing the viability of townhouses close to the Benning Road bridge. In addition to the question of limited daylight to the townhomes, and exposure of residents to noise and air emissions from vehicular traffic, we are concerned that the townhouses are not the appropriate building form or use for enhancing focus and public-orientation for the corner of Ward 7’s downtown at this prominent intersection. We suggest that commercial uses, including offices or gallery space, along with public space, would be more appropriate for this busy corner of the downtown district.

Public cost & benefits of acquisition of current public property

We request that the committees ascertain the public cost of acquisition of each of the parcels and any use of eminent domain to assemble the current property. The property was acquired by the city over the last few years, displacing the Washington institution African Heritage Dance Center (est. 1960), a church, small businesses and owner-occupied homes. We owe it to those who were displaced to ensure that the new use serves a greater public benefit. Knowing the public cost and who was displaced, we can better set our expectations for what public benefits would justify surplus and disposing of the property. The proposed project should help catalyze the improvement of this emerging regional center. Currently, planning to redevelop two other corners of this intersection are in process. The city should ensure that the government property contributes to, if not leads, an overall effort to improve this area.

We ask that Council hold this project to a high standard for public benefits and urban design. This project is critical to fulfilling the community plans that seek to revitalize Ward 7’s downtown district. This area is the only “regional center” designated in the 2006 Comprehensive Plan east of the Anacostia River. This means that the project must provide substantial community benefits; high quality urban design, materials, configuration and use of buildings appropriate to the context; and reserve a public right-of-way for a future street connection to the Benning Road viaduct. It is the responsibility of the Council to ensure that surplus and disposing of this property will achieve a compelling public purpose that justifies the displacement of the recent private owners and occupants.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

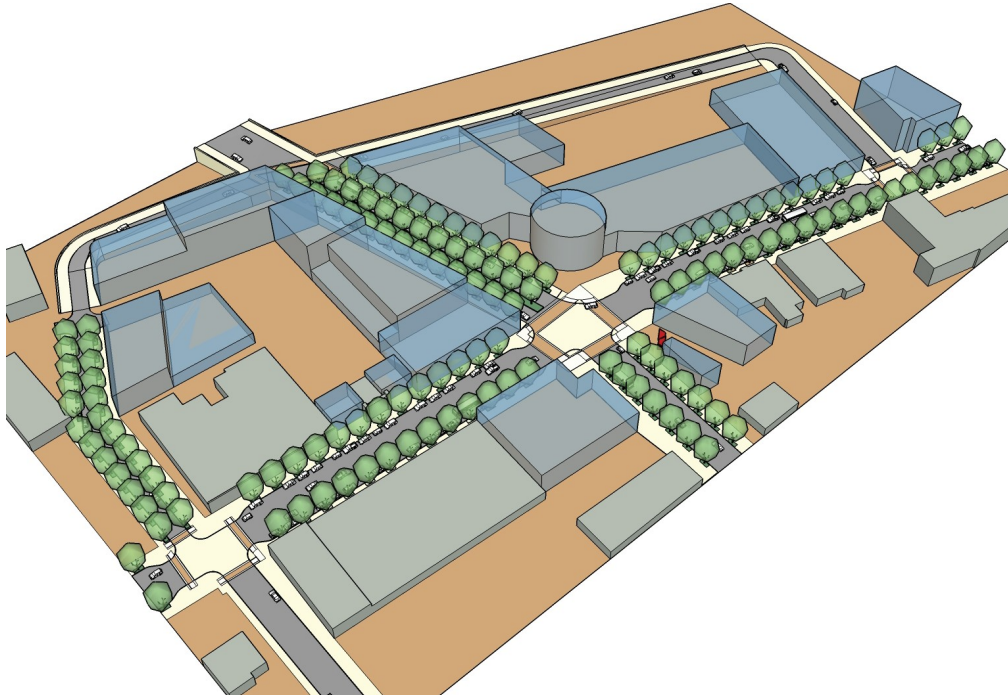
Cheryl Cort
Policy Director

Cc: Hon. Yvette Alexander, Councilmember, Ward 7
Deputy Mayor Valerie Santos

Minnesota Avenue, NE/SE, from Sheriff Road, NE, to Good Hope Road, SE Great Streets Plan

Final Recommendations & Conceptual Streetscape Design

http://ddot.dc.gov/ddot/frames.asp?doc=/ddot/lib/ddot/majorinitiatives/greatstreets/mn-ave/framework-n-streetscape_24.pdf



Below, from Minnesota Avenue Great Streets Plan: http://ddot.dc.gov/ddot/frames.asp?doc=/ddot/lib/ddot/majorinitiatives/greatstreets/mn-ave/MinnAve_Feb27_final.pdf

