



Government of the District of Columbia
ADVISORY NEIGHBORHOOD COMMISSION 3/4G

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**ANC 3/4G Testimony Before the
Committee of the Whole
FY 2022 Budget Hearing
Office of Planning
June 10, 2021**

Chairman Mendelson, Councilmember Cheh, members of the Committee of the Whole, my name is Peter Gosselin. I am a commissioner with ANC 3/4G (Chevy Chase). I testify today about the Mayor's FY 2022 budget for the city's Office of Planning (OP). I do so on behalf of the Commission, which authorized this testimony at its June 2, 2021 special meeting by a vote of – to – (a quorum being 4).¹

The Commission and the community are working with OP on a small area plan to guide both change and continuity on Chevy Chase's upper Connecticut Avenue commercial corridor. The planning process is of special concern to me because I represent the west side of Connecticut Avenue and the bulk of businesses in the corridor. It's of crucial importance to the community, as the Small Area Plan will serve as the foundation of future community growth and

¹ [[6/2/21 rez]]

development. And it should be of considerable interest to you and the wider city, as it is the first of an expected series of small area plans across upper Ward 3 and elsewhere in the District.

If we succeed, we will have provided OP and the city with important local guidance for growth. We'll have built a community consensus for change. And we'll have set an encouraging example for neighborhoods with small area plans in front of them.

But our success is by no means assured. In large measure, it depends on OP and the community having the resources for – and commitment to – a full-fledged planning process. The size of the OP budget you approve will affect resources. Your views about how resources should be allocated could influence public commitment. Specifically:

1. The proposed budget includes decreases in the very line items that give OP the resources to conduct robust small area plans. We think this is unwise, especially at this time.
2. In addition to the agency needing resources, the community needs them as well. We seek the inclusion of additional budget resources to allow Chevy Chase to successfully finish its planning process this fall.

Our Commission has worked hard to advance the District's and community's interest in planning, development, and affordable housing. For example, the Commission's February 2020 resolution on then-proposed amendments to the city's Comprehensive Plan, which OP authored and most of which the Council recently enacted.²

The Commission endorsed the central tenets of the Comp Plan amendments. In the words of our resolution:

- “Our community needs more affordable housing that will promote income diversity and enrich our civic life.
- “Our neighborhood can and should accommodate population growth...”

² ANC 3/4G, Resolution, “Requesting Changes to the Office of Planning’s Proposed Amendments to the Comprehensive Plan,” Feb. 10, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3fzUaDp>

While endorsing these goals, the Commission raised questions about OP's chosen methods. Again from the resolution:

- “While addressing affordable housing extensively, OP's (Comp Plan) changes are not likely to accomplish their target goals...and will not provide a significant number of new affordable housing units without more focused, specific plans...”

The Commission sought ways to pursue the Comprehensive Plan's goals while addressing the concerns voiced by Chevy Chase residents. The method the Commission settled on: A small area plan that would, in the words of the February, 2020 resolution, “help guide long-range development, improve our neighborhood, achieve citywide goals, and attain economic and community benefits.”

In the 16 months since the resolution's approval, the need for affordable housing has only grown as low-income households' with already limited means have withered in the face of economic shutdown. The risks people of color face in even routine encounters with the police have become clearer after George Floyd's death. And Americans' lives and their ability to interact with each other have been threatened by COVID.

Among the many less dire, but nonetheless serious effects of this combination of events has been that the stakes for – and barriers to — public discussion and debate have been raised. Locally, the effective start of our small area planning process was delayed by months. Once started, the difficulty – and added cost – of connecting with people was immediately clear. To date, OP has generally limited public involvement to small group and individual interactions. Its one large virtual community meeting was plagued by technical problems and provided few opportunities for residents to speak.

Despite all of this, the Commission continues to believe in the need for a full-fledged public process. We have enacted a number of recent resolutions to this end, encouraging OP to

be more “engaged and collaborative,”³ asking this Council for legislative changes to ensure our small area plan isn’t trumped by the Comprehensive Plan⁴ and announcing its intention to sponsor community forums⁵ to give residents a chance to talk about the shape of the community they want to pass to the next generation. But we too have been stumped by the difficulty – and additional cost – of bringing people together. This brings us to the OP budget.

OP typically uses funds under its 3010 and 3020 budget categories for “Community Planning and Design” to develop small area plans. And, in fact, the budget proposal before you includes a one-time, \$535,000 injection for, among others, the pending Friendship Heights plan. But this increase is offset by decreases, including \$150,000 in the FY 2021 budget for the Chevy Chase Small Area Plan. The net result in Table BD0-4 is more than a 10.5-percent reduction in the budget categories. By way of comparison, spending under the “Citywide Strategy and Analysis” category is slated to jump almost three-fold.⁶

Ultimately, it is for Mayor Bowser and OP Director Andrew Trueblood to determine where to direct their planning resources. But our experience in Chevy Chase suggests that, to be successful, small area plans require substantially more advance preparation and more ambitious and sustained engagement than can be adequately anticipated by a one-time budget boost. And that’s proving to be especially true, in trying to conduct a planning process during a pandemic. With small area plans being planned for not just Friendship Heights, but elsewhere as well, we suggest that cutting the budget categories that fund them is unwarranted. Faced with a similar

³ ANC 3/4G Resolution, “Requesting the Office of Planning Adopt a More Engaged and Collaborative Process for Developing the Chevy Chase Small Area Plan, Feb. 22, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3c2LUty> .

⁴ ANC 3/4G Resolution, “Requesting that the Council and the Zoning Commission Ensure that No Zoning Changes Will be Approved Before Completion and Council Adoption of the Chevy Chase Small Area Plan,” April 12, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3p6xloy> .

⁵ ANC 3/4G Resolution, “Announcing the Commission’s Intention to Sponsor a Series of Community Forums as Part of the Chevy Chase Small Area Planning Process and Seeking Community Partners,” April 26, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3wHGjkn> .

⁶ District of Columbia, FY 2022, Proposed Budget and Financial Plan, Agency Budget Chapters, Part 1, Volume 2, pp B-65 through B-79, <https://bit.ly/3vCX6VJ> .

proposed cut in the 3010 and 3020 categories for FY 2021, this Council rejected the reduction and approved more than a 10.5-percent increase.⁷

In this regard, to complete our small area planning process successfully, the Commission asks that you allocate additional funds to OPs FY 2022 budget.

To date, the process has included one community meeting, virtual office hours by OP planners that attracted a few dozen residents and a survey now underway. In addition, OP has announced four 50-person virtual workshops in June and a charrette sometime during the summer.⁸ Civic groups, including Ward 3 Vision, Historic Chevy Chase DC, and the Chevy Chase Citizens Association, have sought to contribute to this schedule by sponsoring educational sessions. We have conducted two public Q&As with Director Trueblood⁹ and have committed to sponsor other community engagement-information exchange sessions.¹⁰

Comment [1]:
this paragraph seems out of place. I would move it up

What the Commission believes is missing – and has said as much in a recent resolution — is any mechanism for residents to meet in large numbers and talk about what they are learning and what their hopes are for the community’s future. In addition, more than 500 residents have signed a petition calling for a “community-driven comprehensive planning process...”¹¹

What we believe is needed is a series of community forums to encourage democratic discussion among residents.

But what we’ve learned from our own painful experiences with large meetings and what we observed in OP’s flawed large meeting is that successfully conducting community forums, especially virtual ones, is a tall order. They need to be carefully organized to provide people with

⁷ District of Columbia, FY 2021, Approved Budget and Financial Plan, Agency Budget Chapters, Part 1, Volume 2, table BD-04, p. 75, <https://bit.ly/3vCX6VJ>.

⁸ DC Office of Planning, Chevy Chase SAP Engagement Timeline, as of May 31, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3vFM0iq>.

⁹ ANC 3/4G, Public Zoom Meeting videos, segments featuring OP Director Andrew Trueblood, April 12 and 21, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3yTrxZu> and <https://bit.ly/3p4jnJw>.

¹⁰ ANC 3/4G Resolution, “For the Commission to Foster More Informed Community Engagement in the Chevy Chase Small Area Plan, April 26, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3uACMmw>.

¹¹ ANC 3/4G, Public Zoom Meeting video, segment starting at 38:42, <https://bit.ly/3g1Kvoc>.

a variety of ways to participate. And they need to be moderated by talented facilitators or other experienced hands who can set expectations about what's going to be discussed and what counts as acceptable discussion.

We are reluctant to depend on ourselves or local volunteers. Too much is at stake. We have approached OP about using a facilitator that the agency hired with the funds appropriated for the Chevy Chase planning process. But to date, OP has been unwilling to make that facilitator available.

We propose that the Council allocate funds to OP's budget to cover costs of engaging a facilitator to conduct these forums. Ideally, the facilitator would be the same one it is currently using, who presumably is familiar with the community and the issues surrounding the planning process from the work it is already doing with the agency. We understand that these funds would only become available after the October 1st start of Fiscal 2022, but hope that their appropriation would assure OP that it will not get stuck with unfunded costs and thus encourage officials to allocate some of the facilitator's time now. We very much want to see the full Chevy Chase planning process completed in calendar 2021. Ideally, that would mean a forum before the July 4th holiday after which the community and city slow down. It would mean one or several during the summer as well as forums during September and October. We hope that the appropriation will include a request that OP work jointly with the Commission on scheduling, organizing, and executing the forums.

In order to zero in on the amount needed, we would be happy to consult with OP about what the facilitator's current contract provides for on a per-event basis and then factor in differences between 50-person workshops and large public meetings. But we believe the upper limit of costs would be in the range of \$30,000 to \$40,000.

Let me end by briefly describing what the Commission believes is the purpose of these forums. Urban planning is about more than technical requirements and policy goals. It's about how those requirements can be implemented and goals achieved at a particular place and time. Community involvement is about more than individuals submitting preference lists to planners. It's about building a consensus – including a local consensus -- for change. The only legitimate way to do that is to let people -- after hearing from the experts and advocates -- talk among themselves in large numbers about what they've heard and come to an agreement.

With this budget and your help, we can discuss development and diversity, change and continuity. We can conduct a process that can serve as a model for small area plans to come. And we can come up with a Chevy Chase Small Area Plan that benefits both the community and the District for generations to come.

Thank you.