



**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  
Performance Oversight Hearing for the Office of Planning  
February 24, 2022**

Chairman Mendelson, members of the Committee of the Whole, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the performance of the Office of Planning (OP).

My name is Connie K. N. Chang. I serve as ANC 3/4G-05 Commissioner in Chevy Chase. I am testifying on behalf of our Commission, which authorized this testimony at its properly noticed February 16, 2022 Special Public Meeting by a vote of 6 to 0 (a quorum being 4).

Over the past 18 months, the Commission has been working with OP to conduct a small area planning process for our upper Connecticut Avenue Main Street. Ours is the first in a series of plans slated for Ward 3 neighborhoods. As such, our experience may provide useful guidance for those that come after. In my written testimony, I offer some lessons learned.

Here, I want to highlight a few key points.

During the early months of our planning process, there was a lot of discussion about the exact purpose of a small area plan. Once adopted, did it govern zoning changes and development or serve only as a recommendation or aspiration? Could it interpret or shade the Comprehensive Plan or did it have to remain strictly within Comprehensive Plan limits?

Whatever are the legally correct answers, the hope has been that small area plans would be, in the words of a land use specialist with the Office of Attorney General who spoke at one of our information exchange sessions, the voice of the community in matters of growth, development and change.

While the Commission doesn't want to prejudice the final steps of our process, it seems highly unlikely what emerges from the past year plus of work in Chevy Chase will be the full voice of our community on these issues. There have been many active participants in many of OP's planned activities; however, there are many who are still unaware or uninformed that the neighborhood is undertaking a small area plan.

There remains healthy dispute about what kinds of development-- if any -- should be sought or allowed and some contention about the process that occurred. There has been disappointingly lag time between activities and still far too little public involvement.

There are many reasons. It is generally difficult to attract attention and communicate to residents important news taking place in the community when many do not engage in social media or use email at all, and others are too busy to take the time to voice their input. The pandemic made it all but impossible to meet in person. This forced the use of online meeting tools, which takes a bit of training and comfort to use effectively in engaging people in small and large group discussions. Zoom and the like are uniquely ill-suited for talking about things as tactile as the look and feel of a streetscape or massing of a building.

But a list of reasons must include the Office of Planning and the way it conducted the Chevy Chase small area plan.

- OP was slow to ramp up the process, taking almost five months between initially briefing the Commission about the plan and conducting its first public meeting.
- In key instances, it was as flummoxed by online meeting technology as the residents it was supposed to be guiding.
- It repeatedly dissipated what momentum for discussion was built by allowing large gaps of time to open between meetings.
- It had months long trouble contracting with a design firm to help with the urban design/visualization part of the planning and thus the "design charrette" with the community (or "community design workshop" as it was called) was ultimately disappointing.

- It has kept most discussions at such an abstract level that most residents are uninformed and still have little idea of how a small area plan can help guide and shape any future development.
- Indeed, the office has yet to produce adequate visual representations that is typically shown during design charrettes of what various zoning and other options might look like in the setting of upper Connecticut Avenue, a sore disappointment to my Commission colleagues and me.

If the Council wants future small area plans to be the voices of their communities, it is going to have to ask a good deal more of OP than the agency has delivered in Chevy Chase.

Here I want to lay out lessons learned and recommendations.

We appreciate the Council's support in providing funding for a small area plan as we had requested when we testified before you and the Committee back in November 2020 on the proposed amendments to the Comprehensive Plan, specifically changes to the Future Land Use Map that would permit mixed-use, low-density commercial and moderate-density residential development along the "Chevy Chase Gateway," which spans from Chevy Chase Circle to Livingston Street, NW.<sup>1</sup> The Chevy Chase Small Area Plan aims to serve as an aspirational document containing local guidance and community consensus for the future growth and development of Chevy Chase's upper Connecticut Avenue commercial corridor that is anchored in values that our community holds dear.

The importance of small area plans should not be underestimated. According to OP's response in their FAQ, *What is a Small Area Plan?*, that is posted on the dedicated web page for the Chevy Chase Small Area Plan<sup>2</sup>,

Small Area Plans (SAPs) supplement the Comprehensive Plan by providing more detailed recommendations and implementation strategies for the development of city blocks, corridors, and neighborhoods. The intent of such plans is to guide long-range planning and development that establishes future neighborhood improvements, identifies gaps and opportunities in neighborhood services and amenities, and advances social and economic benefits.

SAPs are developed through a collaborative process that entails significant community outreach and engagement, to both communicate the goals and

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<sup>1</sup> See ANC 3/4G Testimony before the Committee of the Whole on the Comprehensive Plan Amendment Act of 2020 November 12, 2020, found here: <https://anc3g.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Testimony-on-Comp-Plan-Amendments-11-9-20.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> District's Office of Planning's response to FAQ, *What Is a Small Area Plan?*, that is posted on the dedicated web page for the Chevy Chase Small Area Plan, found online here: <https://publicinput.com/chevychase#5>. Accessed on February 16, 2022.

milestones of the planning process as well as provide opportunities for community dialogue on strategic priorities in the planning area. SAPs are typically approved by resolution of the DC Council, and their key recommendations are subsequently incorporated into the Comprehensive Plan Elements. Learn more about SAPs at [planning.dc.gov/page/op-neighborhood-planning](https://planning.dc.gov/page/op-neighborhood-planning).

As noted above and elsewhere, small area plans are meant to “provide supplemental and more detailed guidance to the Comprehensive Plan and may include recommendations for development and guidelines for design. Additionally, the SAP may provide more fine-grained guidance on public realm, urban design, public facility needs etc.”<sup>3</sup>

It stands to reason that the underlying planning process for developing a small area plan carries as much importance as the plan itself.

The planning process is of special concern and interest to me. As Commissioner for Single Member District 5, I represent the east side of Connecticut Avenue from Legation Street to Chevy Chase Circle, where there are several commercial properties on large sites, including Wells Fargo Bank, Safeway, and the Exxon station, as well as the public library and community center, the latter of which are expected to be jointly redeveloped and modernized into a unified campus with mixed-income housing and a public civic core. Along with Commissioner Gosselin, I also represent the Commission as one of fifteen members of the Chevy Chase Small Area Plan’s Community Advisory Committee.

During planning activities with the community last spring, OP engaged the community in addressing broader questions of, “WHY” and “WHAT.” In other words, the vision and goals of the Chevy Chase Small Area Plan. Since late Fall, attention has turned to specific questions of “HOW” and “WHERE” by focusing on urban design and developing specific recommendations intended to realize the vision and goals for the Connecticut Avenue corridor.

As we are nearing the tail end of this process—a draft plan is expected to be delivered by OP in March, followed by a Mayoral hearing and after by a legislative hearing before the plan is adopted—there are lessons learned and recommendations we would like to point out and share with the Council, the Office of Planning, the Office of the Attorney General, and the Ward 3 communities that are embarking on small area plans of their own (Friendship Heights/Tenleytown, Cleveland Park/Van Ness, among others) regarding process improvements in the planning effort.

**Lesson Learned #1. Need For a “Small Area Plan 101” Guidebook.** At the start, no one in the community but OP understands completely what a small area plan is, as so few are carried out in the District. There does not exist an easy to understand, “Small Area Plan 101” or “Small Area

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<sup>3</sup> District’s Office of Planning’s response to FAQ, *How Do Recommendations in a Small Area Plan Correspond to Guidance in the Comprehensive Plan?*, that is posted on the dedicated web page for the Chevy Chase Small Area Plan, found online here: <https://publicinput.com/chevychase#5>. Accessed on February 16, 2022.

Plans for Dummies” guidebook for novices. It is critically important to start off this process with clarity of purpose. Many residents in our neighborhood who have engaged from the start continue to express confusion about many aspects of the small area plan, including the purpose of the small area plan; how the small area plan fits in with the Comprehensive Plan in practice; what role each party in a small area plan plays (ANC, OP, Council, private developers, other developers, other District agencies, Zoning Commission); how change occurs and who directs change in a development sense in the city; what language is necessary to make sure the small area plan can help shape future change as expressed by community consensus; and what other tools in the toolbox can be used to create the kind of future we would most like to see. In addition, clarity on the OP offices that comprise the “project team” (e.g., neighborhood planning, urban design, design review, etc), their role in such planning, and how they work together (including with outside contractors) to produce a small area plan is important to convey in such a document.

**Recommendation.** We recommend that either OP (or the Office of the Attorney General’s Land Use Section for public interest purposes) create such a document that can be shared for instance on OP’s dedicated web page for small area plans, printed as a physical brochure, and downloadable as a PDF file. It would be highly beneficial to have in one place information that spells out what a small area plan is (and is not), the process, the players, and how a plan can be turned into actionable guidance that includes the following elements:

- (i) definitions for commonly used terms (e.g., setbacks, FLUM, upFLUM, PUDs, IZ and IZ+) and phrases (e.g., matter of right, zoning codes, map amendments) and how they may come up in the context of a small area plan;
- (ii) the role of each entity involved in the planning phase (e.g., OP (including various offices and contractors), other district agencies, ANC, local community groups, residents, Office of Attorney General, Mayor, Council) and in future development (e.g., Zoning Commission, OP, ANC, community groups, residents, private property owners, developers, district agencies);
- (iii) what community members should expect as they move through the process (i.e., phases of engagement—more below) and what an eventual draft small area plan will look like with examples of language attached to expressed needs, desires, concerns of the community; and
- (iv) how the language in a small area plan that carries aspirations for the future gets turned into actionable zoning, map or text amendments and who is responsible for that translation. In addition, for communities who wish to request a small area plan, it would be good to add how they can in the document.

Right now, there are only two paragraphs of description to address the question, “What Is a Small Area Plan?” under the FAQ section of the dedicated Chevy Chase Small Area Plan web

page and then a link to a section on OP’s website that provides little additional information, as shown above.<sup>4</sup>

**Lesson Learned #2.** OP notes six phases of engagement in sequential order for the Chevy Chase Small Area Plan: (i) Listening and Learning; (ii) Kick-Off; (iii) Visioning; (iv) Plan Development; (v) Legislative Process; and (vi) Monitoring.<sup>5</sup> The Chevy Chase Small Area Plan was budgeted for FY 2021, but the “Kick-Off” meeting with the community did not occur until March 4, 2021 which was a long and frustrating wait for the community that resulted in a lot of complaints and misinformation in the chat, as the project team dealt with technical difficulties during that virtual kick-off call.

In short, aside from giving a high-level presentation introducing the small area plan at the October 13, 2020 ANC 3/4G Public Meeting,<sup>6</sup> OP’s project team spent five months in the “listening and learning” phase, recruiting members to the Community Advisory Committee and gearing up for the kick-off. The “Visioning” phase didn’t get into higher gear until June 2021 when OP scheduled four virtual visioning workshops, and then another long wait commenced as OP experienced difficulties with bringing in the contractor for the penultimate design charrette who wasn’t onboarded until mid-November 2021, which was well into the next fiscal year. The scheduling of events came in dribs and drabs which did not give the community confidence of what to expect in the planning process.

**Recommendation.** We recommend a “pre-kick-off” meeting to occur before the “listening and learning” phase for OP to set the stage for the coming year and explain the work involved in the different phases as well as introduce an SAP 101 document and the leaders in the various offices across OP.

**Recommendation.** We recommend that the “listening and learning” phase include scheduled conversations or open office hours with the project team so that anyone in the community could ask questions about the process before the formal “kick-off.”

**Recommendation.** We recommend that OP share at the start a draft timeline matched to the phases of engagement to give the community a sense of OP’s commitment to a transparent process and an understanding of how the community is expected to engage (e.g., survey, visioning workshop, walk-through, design charrette) and when that engagement will take place. For example, by the time the kick-off meeting for the Chevy Chase Small Area Plan took place in March 2021, there were only six months left and a summer in between to finish up the process

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<sup>4</sup> For the FAQ, “What is A Small Area Plan?,” go to [publicinput.com/chevychase](https://publicinput.com/chevychase) and click on the FAQ tab. There is a link in that first FAQ for “additional information” on small area plans that provides very little additional information as you can see here: <https://planning.dc.gov/page/op-neighborhood-planning>. Accessed on February 16, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> The six phases of engagement can be found here: <https://publicinput.com/chevychase#4>.

<sup>6</sup> The presentation delivered at the ANC 3/4G October 13, 2020 can be found in the minutes of that meeting here: <https://anc3g.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Meeting-Minutes-10-13-20-2.pdf>, and the video recording of the presentation can be found here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1\\_-orFmzDGs&t=4635s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_-orFmzDGs&t=4635s).

by the end of the fiscal year. There was a general sense that we were already behind schedule in having a robust process and engagement with the community that we had hoped for. To address those concerns, the Commission enacted several resolutions encouraging OP to be more “engaged and collaborative”<sup>7</sup> as well as taking leadership ourselves in engaging experts on relevant topics to involve the community in what we called Information Exchange sessions, with our eighth one coming up soon.<sup>8</sup>

**Lesson Learned #3.** Attracting attention, building community, and reaching consensus. District-wide problem of informing residents of upcoming activities and engaging them, but things like big posters and yard signs to drive attention to the dedicated website, mailings, flyers, etc., were not employed effectively. In addition, with the pandemic making in-person meetings very difficult, most of the workshops were held virtually while office hours with the project team were held in-person but were not well-attended. As OP itself has noted, “it is incumbent on the project team to look beyond established groups to ensure marginalized and/or underrepresented voices and perspectives are elevated throughout the planning process.”<sup>9</sup> The Commission believes OP fell short in this regard.

**Recommendation.** We recommend a budget for materials to be distributed to the community, including mailings to residents and businesses concerned with or affected by a small area plan, ideally all residents in the entire ANC and not just residents within the boundaries of the small area plan, for each phase of engagement, and posters and yard signs scattered throughout the ANC to direct the community to upcoming events and the dedicated web page for more information.

**Lessons Learned #4.** Issues other than development such as overcrowding of our public schools and lack of reliable transportation were not adequately addressed in the planning process, and the existing conditions report was never shared with the community and therefore never discussed publicly. That lack of attention affects community support for important District-wide goals like affordable housing and racial equity. More attention needs to be paid on how the Mayor’s and the Council’s goals for the District are translated into a small area planning process.

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<sup>7</sup> 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>.

<sup>8</sup> 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/3wHGikn>. The ANC 3/4G Hosted Fall 2021 and Winter 2022 Information Exchange Series sessions (topics, speakers, video recordings, chat log) can be found here: [https://anc3g.org/task\\_forces/small-area-plan/anc-3-4g-fall-2021-info-exchange-series/](https://anc3g.org/task_forces/small-area-plan/anc-3-4g-fall-2021-info-exchange-series/).

<sup>9</sup> See: <https://publicinput.com/chevy Chase#4>, under “Opportunities and Constraints.”

**Recommendation.** We recommended that OP share and hold a public discussion of the existing conditions report and bring other agencies into a conversation with the community during the planning process of a small area plan so that concerns can be aired directly and solutions noted in the draft plan. We also recommend that the Mayor and the Council establish as a fundamental requirement that executable plans to ensure racial equity and affordable housing be fully articulated in the Small Area Plan before it is finalized.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our lessons learned and recommendations on our experience with the small area plan process.