

'No One Asked Me' Community Engagement Follows Land Disposition Delay

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY VIRGINIA AVNIEL SPATZ

Several Ward 7 redevelopment projects are temporarily off “the fast-track.” In July, the DC Council was considering land disposition agreements (LDAs) for five projects, including three in Ward 7:

- The Strand Theatre (Division and Nannie Helen Burroughs avenues NE),
- “Eastern Avenue” (400-414 Eastern Ave. NE; 6100 Dix St. NE)
- and “Phase II” (northwest corner of Minnesota Avenue and Benning Road NE).

These projects can “play a significant transformative role in their respective communities,” says Sean Madigan, spokesperson for the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development (DMPED). Benefits include “millions of dollars in new investment,” jobs, housing, retail and office space.

On July 8, the DC Council Committee on Government Operations and the Environment, chaired by Ward 3 Councilmember Mary Cheh, and the Committee on Economic Development, chaired by At-Large Councilmember Kwame Brown, held a joint roundtable on the projects. Approval had been expected at the final legislative session in July.

But all concerned now have several weeks for further consideration, as the LDAs were not approved before the recess.

Is ‘Phase II’ Surplus Land?

No flags were raised for the “Eastern Avenue” or Strand Theatre projects during the roundtable. Community members agreed that the land in question was “blighted” and “surplus.” Witnesses reported active community benefits agreements.

Questions were raised, however, about “Phase II” – \$13 million in land awarded to the Donatelli/Blue Skye team in October 2008 for affordable and market-rate housing with ground-floor retail. Is this entirely “surplus”? Or should part be reserved for a project designed to alleviate dangerous congestion at the Minnesota-Benning intersection?

One of the two community members who argued for “Phase II” without qualification – Suzannah Codlin Greene – neglected to mention that she is a project manager for Blue Skye Development.



On a weekday evening, pedestrians and cyclists vie with motorists at the intersection of Benning Road and Minnesota Avenue NE. A project to reduce dangerous congestion here has been proposed as a “community benefit” in exchange for \$13 million dollars in land at the northwest corner.



Two other community witnesses pointed out that the affected properties were not, as some assumed, “long abandoned” (e.g., the African Heritage Dance Center – operating there for decades and still listed on Metro plaza signage – was forced to move by the government center project). Lifelong resident Dennis Chestnut and Cheryl Cort, of the Coalition for Smarter Growth, testified to supporting “Phase II” with District retention of right of way for a possible viaduct off Benning Road.

Ayris Scales, DMPED project manager, testified that the viaduct was an unfunded “option” in the Great Streets plan, pronouncing its need “debatable.”

“Debatable? I say preserve our options,” Cheh responded. “The burden should be on why we should get rid of [the relevant parcels]. ... Keep it in the inventory until such time as we can make use of it.”

Delay Prompts Engagement

After the LDAs failed to win quick approval, the Donatelli/Blue Skye team participated in a special meeting of Advisory Neighborhood Commission 7D. Chris Donatelli and Larry Clark of Donatelli Development and Bryan “Scottie” Irving of Blue Skye had last met with the ANC in November 2008.

Asked at the roundtable whether the ANC supported the project, Donatelli responded: “I believe so. We’ve been fairly active, but it will only increase once we get past this [LDA process.]” In fact, 7D never voted support, and the team did not return to the community until July.

Asked about this delay, Scales replied: “No one asked me.”

Some vocally blame lack of engagement on previous ANC disorganization: There was no quorum at the November 2008 meeting and, apparently, no follow

up from that commission. The new commission – established in January – was not approached by Scales or the Donatelli team until after the LDA process stalled.

Chestnut believes all parties bear some responsibility.

“Early on Donatelli was not engaged in this community at all, and we must have been presented to him in a marginalizing kind of way – promise them a turkey and then move forward.”

Meanwhile, Chestnut adds, he saw good results, working with DMPED and developers to craft meaningful community benefits agreements for the Strand and other projects in the Lincoln Heights area. He says he asked both Donatelli and Scales, as professionals who understand the development process, to engage the community – which does not always know “when and how to insert themselves.” In the end, though, Chestnut and others argue, “It’s time for the community to step up its game.”

Community Participation Sought

At the July 31 meeting, Donatelli expressed an interest in working with new commissioners and other members of the community. He also indicated – to Scales’ vocal disagreement – that the viaduct could still be explored. Scales told the July 31 meeting that the viaduct is not a “community benefit” but a “road to nowhere.” The Department of Employment Services, “Phase II” and the new Metro parking together will add 800 parking spaces to “nowhere.”

An ad hoc committee planned to tour other Donatelli projects and begin working on Ward 7 specific suggestions. To participate, contact Willette Seaward, chair of ANC 7D, or Ayris Scales in DMPED, 202-727-6365. ★