



ADVISORY NEIGHBORHOOD COMMISSION 1A

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29 November 2016

Testimony on Behalf of Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1A in Support for PR21-0908 | Bruce Monroe Surplus Declaration and Approval Resolution of 2016 and PR21-0909 | Bruce Monroe Disposition Approval Resolution of 2016

Chairman Mendelson and members of the Council of the District of Columbia, my name is Kent Boese, and as Chair of Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1A I am here today to ask for your favorable consideration on the Surplus and Disposition Resolutions for the Bruce Monroe site. By lending your support to this legislation, you will be supporting the residents of Park Morton, the residents of Park View and the Lower Georgia Avenue communities, and the long-term investments in the economic growth of Georgia Avenue that my fellow Commissioners and I – and many in Ward 1 and the District – have worked hard to achieve.

As with any decision that involves a project as large, significant, and complex as the redevelopment of Park Morton and the associated surplus and disposition of the Bruce Monroe Development Site, there are differing opinions on how this project can move forward successfully. Although those in opposition to the current plan have been vociferous and engaged, Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1A believes that the use of the site as the build first site for the Park Morton redevelopment project is in the best interest of the community and the District of Columbia as a whole. Based on the many conversations I and other Commissioners have had with constituents and the participation and feedback received via over 50 public meetings and workshops devoted to this project, we believe a great majority of residents in the area agree with and support the Commission's position. In September we also submitted copies of ANC1A's resolutions supporting the surplus and disposition of the property to each of you and have since filed them with the Zoning Commission, where there are publically available.

For us to have an informed and factual conversation, it is important for me to share some key facts relevant to this issue. I have personally been concerned and involved with the Park Morton effort since my election to the Commission in 2011.

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Due to the failure of the original effort to move Park Morton forward, I personally sat down with Judy and Peter Siegel of Landex Corporation on January 9, 2013, and October 10, 2013. At both of these meetings, we discussed what was needed for the project to move forward. It boiled down to two things – an active and supportive District Government AND available land. Try as they might, private property owners along Georgia Avenue were unwilling to sell Landex land. Ultimately, this led to the District and Landex parting ways.

Based on these interactions, I too began looking at the availability of land on Georgia Avenue and came to the conclusion that the best possible way forward for Park Morton was to use the Bruce Monroe site as part of the overall development. I shared this idea publicly in a blog post on November 1, 2013 (Exhibit A). I mention this as it helps establish just how long this idea has been part of the public dialogue. When the District formally restarted the process to select a new developer for Park Morton, several of those competing in the RFP process read that blog post and reached out to me to discuss the pros and cons of using the former school site as part of the solution for Park Morton. Additionally, DMPED reviewed available sites in the Park View area and independently confirmed what I had learned two years earlier – that the former Bruce Monroe school site is the best available site to get the Park Morton new community back on track.

Why Bruce Monroe?

The reason the Bruce Monroe site is ideal for the build first site of the Park Morton project is due to its close proximity to Park Morton and its designation as a development site since 2009. While the original plan for the site was to construct a new elementary school, DCPS has determined that they have no plans to do so. Furthermore, no other District agency is interested in using the site to achieve their goals. By definition, this makes the site surplus.

We in the community have known for several years that sooner or later something would be built on the Bruce Monroe site – though what and when has been uncertain. This is why two sessions were devoted to this very topic at the August 9, 2014, Georgia Avenue Community Development Task Force Community review. The results of that review showed that there was a “general consensus among participants in both sessions ... lean[ing] towards having an active park with a combination of high to medium density commercial development” for the site (Exhibit B).

Proactively addressing this issue, ANC1A also conducted a survey of the area generally around the Bruce Monroe site asking residents what they would like to see developed there. The Commission received just over 800 responses. Despite the survey questions and advocacy being biased by pro-park advocates, the results showed that 48.8% of those participating were agreeable to the site being used to support some combination of park and development (Exhibit C).

Eminent Domain

One idea that has been suggested by those who oppose using the Bruce Monroe site for the Park Morton project is eminent domain. I, too, thought about this in my November 1, 2013, blog post. Eminent Domain is a powerful tool which I think the District should use when appropriate – such as when we need to build a school, road, hospital, or any number of projects serving a public purpose. However, our city should be vigilant to ensure that such a powerful tool is never abused. Taking private land on Georgia Avenue – no matter how underperforming it may be – merely to hand it over to a new private owner would be such an abuse. As the Park Morton development also includes workforce and market rate housing, the use of eminent domain to create that housing would be inappropriate at best, and illegal at worst.

Fortunately, here to the Bruce Monroe site offers a solution. The site contains just under 1 acre of land (roughly 36%) that was taken by eminent domain in 1970 so that the Bruce Monroe school could be built. It makes logical sense that this land should be developed – either as part of the Park Morton project or privately. In either event, the Georgia Avenue frontage that was taken to build the school should be returned to private, developed use one way or the other. As the District still owns it, it only makes sense that it be used to help us meet other local goals, such as the increase of housing at all income levels.

Preserving the Park

Not only does using the Bruce Monroe site allow the District to use land taken by eminent domain and help restore the commercial fabric of Georgia Avenue, it also helps preserve and expand existing park space. Many may testify that the Park View community lacks as much park space as the community would like to see – a result of the Soldiers' Home closing access in 1955. Yet we do have nearby

recreation areas such as Bannaker, two pocket parks on Hobart, the Park View Recreation Center, and Wangari Gardens. What is notable about the Bruce Monroe site is that each time it has been developed, the existing recreation space has been preserved and enlarged.

Prior to 1970, the old Monroe School had a small playground that was approximately 16,553 sq. ft. Upon the completion of the Bruce Monroe School, the playground was increased to approximately 33,105 sq. ft., though all of it was covered in asphalt. The proposed Park Morton plan would increase it further still to approximately 44,404 sq. ft.

Greater Benefits of Park Morton Project to Georgia Avenue Community

As previously stated, ANC 1A supports the surplus and disposition of the Bruce Monroe site so that the decade-old promise to replace the existing Park Morton apartment complex with quality housing can become a reality.

When it comes to the redevelopment of Park Morton, the most obvious benefits are:

- Replacing the 147 public housing units with new quality public housing units – and doing so without displacing the residents from the community;
- Creating 155 new affordable housing units in a city and Ward that is becoming increasingly unaffordable;
- Creating 78 new senior housing units; and,
- Creating new permanent park spaces.

While the items listed above are concrete and measurable examples of how your support for the Bruce Monroe Surplus and Disposition Resolutions will benefit the community, moving this project forward will have a far greater and long-lasting positive impact on Georgia Avenue. In addition to increasing housing options at all levels of affordability, it will also have positive effects on public safety and development along the corridor. By aligning new roads and reknitting the development on Morton Street into the surrounding community, blind alleys and the Morton Street cul-de-sac will be removed – a configuration that is not conducive to public safety. And by removing the uncertainty on whether the redevelopment of Park Morton will move forward, the District will encourage developers who own property on Georgia Avenue to move forward with their respective projects.

Some members of this Council have served long enough to remember the impact that the opening of the Georgia Avenue/Petworth Metro Station had on the surrounding community and how it improved public safety in the area and encouraged new investment, new businesses, and new development. By supporting the surplus and disposition of the Property at Irving Street and Georgia Avenue – which supports the redevelopment of Park Morton – you have another such opportunity to achieve something just as vital and meaningful to the community and the District of Columbia as a whole.

I thank you for your consideration, and am available to answer any questions you may have.