

This is the chance to tell the city we want it all – a great community Civic Core *and* affordable housing.

BE A PART OF THE SOLUTION

OurRFP meetings will be held on October 14 from 12:00-4:00 pm at the Community Center (note new location) and October 18 from 6:00-8:00 pm at the Chevy Chase Presbyterian Church, right on Chevy Chase Circle.

PLEASE ATTEND BOTH THE OCTOBER 14 AND 18 MEETINGS

FAQ about the Civic Core

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1. *Who sent out this flyer in support of affordable housing as a part of redeveloping the Chevy Chase Civic Core?*

We are your neighbors, and we believe that Chevy Chase should play a part in alleviating our city's housing crisis. We include members of Washington Interfaith Network (WIN) Ward 3, Ward3Vision,

and a group of other neighbors in the Chevy Chase DC area, including (with number of years of neighborhood residence in parentheses) Chas Cadwell (42 years), Ron Eichner (45 years), Jim Feldman (32 years), Carl Lankowski (13 years), Tom Hier (29 years), Ellen McCarthy (35 years), and Greg Schmidt (31 years). We believe that a redeveloped Civic Core should include *both* affordable housing *and* a new and much improved version of the current facilities (i.e., state-of-the-art library and community facilities and great outdoor recreation and conversation areas).

2. What is the current status of plans for the Civic Core site?

After a years-long planning process that involved community members, the ANC approved, and the City Council unanimously adopted a Small Area Plan (see link [here](#)). That plan called for the Civic Core site to be redeveloped with a state-of-the-art library and community center, along with recreational and conversational spaces for all ages and abilities, and housing (including affordable housing to the greatest extent possible). Currently, in response to a further request from the ANC, the city is working on new zoning proposals that apply the design guidelines in the Small Area Plan to the Civic Core and the rest of our commercial district. It is also in the midst of seeking requests for proposals from builders for exactly how the site would be developed.

The District agency that handles this process is the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development (DMPED). Ordinarily, DMPED issues a Request for Proposals (RFP) when it seeks development of a parcel of land. DMPED then either chooses between the competing proposals that are submitted, works with the participating firms to develop proposals that better match the city and the community's needs, or rejects all of the proposals and initiates a new round of RFPs.

3. How will the community be involved in this process?

The community will be able to provide input into the criteria for selection prior to formulation of the RFP via the OurRFP process (more on that below.)

In the same time frame, the ANC is conducting a survey of its own about the future of the Civic Core. **PLEASE PARTICIPATE IN THE SURVEY** and help show that our community wants great new public facilities *and* affordable housing at the Civic Core site that will enrich our community with greater inclusion and diversity.

After the city receives responses from the RFP, but prior to selection of a winning proposal, the ANC will have the opportunity to review and comment on what it likes and doesn't like about all the submissions. The City Council also must approve the selection of a final proposal

4. What is the OurRFP process for the Civic Core site that is now ongoing?

The city describes the OurRFP process, which is being applied to development of the Civic Core, as designed to incorporate community engagement, and ensure that the public's perspective and priorities are understood when crafting and issuing the RFP. The views and priorities expressed by the public at the OurRFP meetings can be incorporated into the RFP itself. Developers in turn will try to satisfy the community's desires when submitting proposals. Those who don't respond to the community's preferences are unlikely to be selected.

The city has used the OurRFP process at six other sites so far. See <https://dmped.dc.gov/page/our-rfp>. Of particular note is the old Hebrew Home at 1125 Spring St. NW. After the OurRFP process, the RFP stated:

“Based on feedback received through the OurRFP process, residents and community members desire a project that reflects the important value of these sites to the neighborhood and embodies the following characteristics:

- **As much affordable housing above the 30% minimum requirement as viable, targeting the lowest income bands and including housing reserved for senior citizens**, ADA-compliant units, and opportunities for homeownership;....”

The selected proposal had approx. 80% affordable units including significant amount of senior housing. Basically, the OurRFP process worked well, and the community had an impact on the results.

5. When and where will the OurRFP meetings be held on October 14 and 18? Why is it important that I attend them (both, if possible)?

OurRFP meetings will be held on October 14 from 12:00-4:00 pm at the Community Center (note new location) and October 18 from 6:00-8:00 pm, at the Chevy Chase Presbyterian Church, right on Chevy Chase Circle.

City officials and housing experts will be present at these meetings, along with a meeting facilitator to coordinate the gathering. They will present information about the site and seek comments and advice from the community on important aspects of the redevelopment. These comments can have a huge impact on what will be built on the Civic Core site, as we saw at 1125 Spring St.. Both meetings are important, because the results of the October 14 meeting will become the framework for the October 18 meeting.

Opponents of affordable housing (and of redevelopment generally) will likely be present at both meetings. We need YOUR voice to show the city what our community really wants. **PLEASE ATTEND BOTH THE OCTOBER 14 AND 18 MEETINGS IF AT ALL POSSIBLE.** This is your chance to be a part of the solution!

6. What’s in the approved Small Area Plan (CCSAP) for the Civic Core site?

The Small Area Plan was approved by our ANC and then adopted as law/policy by the City Council in 2022. It “envisions the site as the renewed civic core of Chevy Chase that is at the heart of the community with a new library, new community center, refreshed open space, and a meaningful share of dedicated affordable housing. Design principles include:

- Redevelop the site with modernized, state-of-the- art facilities, exemplifying attractive, enduring and sustainable design.
- Make the new facilities inviting and accessible by improving their relationship to the sidewalk and street.
- Leverage full Comprehensive Plan height and density to co-locate civic uses with a significant amount of mixed-income housing.
- Maximize outdoor public gathering and recreational spaces.

- Reflect community identity through locally- significant commemoration.”

Per the CCSAP

7. *Why here at the Civic Core?*

Unlike other large tracts under redevelopment in Ward 3, the District already owns the property at the Civic Core and can use it to help make providing affordable housing more economically feasible. Affordable housing is expensive. It costs something like \$650,000 to build one affordable apartment home, and that doesn't include the cost of land. If the District provides the land for free or cheap, that allows more housing to be built. This is called leveraging public assets (the publicly owned land) for public good (more affordable housing). It is widely considered a very efficient and effective way for a community to address the affordable housing crisis.

8. *Is there really a dire shortage of affordable housing in the city and the neighborhood?*

Every major study or analysis has concluded that there is a severe shortage of affordable housing in the District and surrounding area, and that the problem is getting worse. One recent study reported that more than one-quarter of rental households were paying more than 50% of their income for housing and utilities in 2022. Nearly all those renters had family incomes below \$50,000, and 65% of families with incomes at that level were paying more than half their income for rent. Moreover, those figures exclude those who are homeless or in the homeless care system. While homelessness has many causes, unaffordable housing is certainly one of them.

This housing crisis has dire effects. Families paying most of their limited incomes for rent have less to spend on food and other basic needs. Children in severely rent-burdened families or in overcrowded conditions are more likely than others to fall behind in school and drop out. Adults in homes with severe housing affordability problems face high rates of depression and often miss medical appointments, delay medical care, and fail to fill prescriptions. Lack of quality affordable housing leaves many households living in deteriorated, unhealthy housing, with toxic substances, pests, inadequate ventilation, or unreliable heating and cooling. Families living in substandard housing suffer higher rates of chronic illnesses such as asthma, respiratory infections, and lead poisoning. It is no wonder that it is often said that a child's zip code is more predictive of future success than their IQ. See UPO, "DC is Not Making Progress on Affordable Housing for Those Who Need it Most," Sept. 2023.

The Mayor's 2019 Rock Creek West Roadmap notes: "*The Housing Equity Report* established goals for total housing units and dedicated affordable units for each of the District's Planning Areas. The report determined that of the 10 Planning Areas, Rock Creek West (which ChChDC is a part) had the fewest dedicated affordable units – less than 1% of the District total compared to a high of 30% in the Far Southeast & Southwest Planning Area. This means that residents with lower incomes have fewer opportunities to live in Rock Creek West than other neighborhoods in the District." Fewer than 1%!

9. *But what is affordable housing, really?*

When we talk about affordable housing in this context, we are referring to housing that is dedicated as affordable, meaning: (1) it can't be rented at market rates for some predetermined amount of time; (2)

it is restricted to people at certain established income levels, generally between 30% and 80% of the area's median family income; and (3) it has maximum rents tied to 30% of a resident's income. See [this](#) helpful chart.

Rent controlled apartments are different from dedicated affordable housing. Rent-controlled units may be (and frequently are) occupied by people with much higher incomes. If there were an excess of inexpensive rent-controlled units, we would not have a housing crisis. But there are not close to enough available rent-controlled units at low enough prices to alleviate the drastic shortage for people who cannot afford higher housing prices.

10. How much affordable housing could be included in the Civic Core site?

We cannot know how much affordable housing could be included until we see the RFPs that are submitted. The city has indicated that a minimum of 30% of the housing on this city-owned site must be affordable, and we hope that much more than that can be included in a great new plan for the Civic Core. Our ANC passed a resolution on March 22, 2021, calling for at least 50% affordable housing at the site.

11. Would affordable housing lead to increased inclusiveness and diversity in the neighborhood?

Certainly. There are currently no dedicated affordable apartments in the area, so there are few if any options for families that meet those income levels in our high-priced neighborhood. But beyond that, broadening choices for housing types in our neighborhood, where single-family homes predominate and are increasingly out of reach, can provide options for younger residents and ways for empty nesters to remain in the neighborhood that now either do not exist or are in short supply.

The land in our neighborhood was originally owned by the Chevy Chase Land Co., which was controlled by Sen. Francis Newlands, who was an avowed racist. As the Land Co. sold off the land in the original Chevy Chase DC subdivisions, it included covenants requiring all houses to have a minimum cost and precluding apartment buildings. The intent – and certainly, the effect – of those provisions up to the current day has been to exclude people with less wealth from living in our neighborhood and keep it an economically segregated, largely White enclave in a very diverse city. Adding affordable housing at the Civic Core site would certainly bring us the benefits of greater inclusion and increased economic, and racial, diversity.

12. Can all this stuff - a state-of-the-art community center, library, and housing – actually fit on the site while providing outdoor recreation, conversation, and garden space comparable to what is there now?

Absolutely. People have already sketched out one way in which all these uses could be placed on the site in a configuration that is more user-friendly than at present. See [here](#). Of course, there are many other possibilities. Once skilled designers and architects have the chance to work on real-world plans based on the Request for Proposals (RFP) that the city will release, we are likely to see other exciting possibilities.

13. But wouldn't the addition of a significant amount of affordable housing necessarily compromise building a new library and community center, with open space equal in area and superior in accessibility and functionality to what is there now?

No. First of all, thanks to the ANC's efforts, the zoning proposed by the Office of Planning includes a provision that requires that there will be an amount of open space on the site in the future that is equal to or greater than the amount of useable open space that currently exists (not counting the parking lot). The current site has a 60s-era, suburban-type design, with buildings facing inward, rather than engaging the commercial district on Connecticut Avenue. Much of the current open space, such as the small lawns facing Connecticut Avenue or the berms facing McKinley St., are basically inaccessible. It will be easy to improve on what exists now. In a new design, the library and community center could open directly to the avenue and contribute to the vitality of our commercial district, rather than deadening it. The gardens and play spaces could be designed to be much more inviting and offer more possibilities for recreation and conversation. Maybe even pickleball and a café could be included!

14. Is there any guarantee that the city will follow through on its commitment to build affordable housing at the site?

The Chevy Chase Small Area Plan, which was approved unanimously by the D.C. Council, requires a minimum of 30% affordable housing if housing is built at the Community Center/Library site. Mayor Bowser has set ambitious targets for construction of new affordable housing, including a target for our Rock Creek West Planning Area that we are nowhere near meeting, so she and her staff will be pressing to deliver on those promises as much as possible. It's clear that the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Economic Development (DMPED) has marching orders to deliver as much affordable housing as possible to address the city's affordable housing crisis.

On top of that, the D.C. Council will need to approve any transfer of property interests in the Chevy Chase Commons to a developer before any development happens, and the Council isn't going to approve a transaction that includes none or a few affordable units and a large number of 100-200 luxury, market-rate apartments. While that's not a "guarantee," all of that suggests that there is close to zero chance that the city would allow construction of housing at the site that doesn't include a significant percentage of affordable housing. Anyone concerned about this should attend DMPED's upcoming "Our RFP" meetings and demand that the percentage of affordable housing at the site be maximized, and should make the same point in responding to the ANC's upcoming community survey.

15. What about zoning for the Civic Core site?

Traditional zoning tells us what uses we can have and sets limits on things like how high you can build, or how much stuff you can put on a site. Beyond that, anything goes. Good urban buildings that engage and support the public realm like the Avalon or the Chevy Chase Arcade sit cheek-by-jowl with suburban buildings sited forlornly in the middle of huge parking lots like Wells Fargo, or buildings that don't even try to engage the public like Safeway and its dreadful blank walls. Or, arguably, the Library and Community Center, designed at a moment when the suburban ideal was considered cool and cities, then in decline, were not.

The proposed zoning is different. As the ANC requested, the new zoning is more akin to a 'form-based' (i.e., design-based) code for our mixed-use district that would more closely guide the appearance of new buildings. The new zoning is more *prescriptive* – it focuses on telling us not just what we can't do, but what we should do to create a vital district that comfortably fits the existing context. It doesn't just set a maximum height, it requires certain stepping back of new structures where they abut existing homes. It requires high ground floors to make new buildings more friendly to retail shops and restaurants. It requires frequent entrances and lots of glass on ground floors (no more Safeway or CVS dull frontages!) and limits glass on upper floors to encourage architecture more compatible with traditional styles (no glass boxes allowed here!). It even provides for incentives to encourage the retention of the charming older facades on the west side of the Avenue.

The Civic Core is zoned separately from the rest of the Avenue to include the institutional uses, as well as to allow an additional floor in height which will provide more flexibility for the ground floor public uses, which typically require higher ceilings, as well as the potential for more affordable housing. The city will likely soon submit the proposal to the Zoning Commission to adopt after a period of public comment.

Beyond the zoning, the development of the Civic Core lot will be controlled by the RFP process, which will allow the design to be scrutinized in much greater detail than any zoning code ever could.

16. I heard that Connecticut Avenue is going to have skyscrapers and look like Bethesda, is that true?

Not at all. The big Bethesda buildings that many people dislike are 250 – 300 feet high (20-30 stories). The proposed zoning for Connecticut Avenue is for a maximum of 5 – 7 stories. That is the scale of typical mid-rise neighborhood residential-commercial mixed-use buildings, and much shorter than buildings such as the 110-foot 5333 Connecticut Avenue (at Military) or the 100-foot-tall buildings on Connecticut Avenue between Legation and Livingston.

17. How tall could buildings be on the Civic Core lot under current zoning laws, and under the city's new zoning proposal for that lot?

The floor count can be complicated, because not all floors are alike. For example, while residential floors are generally about 10 ft., the ground floors of civic buildings like libraries and community centers are frequently higher than in other buildings, perhaps 20 or 25 ft.

Existing zoning allows 40 ft (3 floors) plus a 15 ft penthouse set back from the building's base so that

it is less visible = 55 ft total overall height, or 4 floors.

Proposed zoning for most of the commercial stretch allows 50 ft (4 floors) plus a 15 ft set back penthouse = 65 ft total overall height, or 5 floors.

Proposed zoning for the Civic Core allows 65 ft (5 floors) plus a 15 ft set back penthouse = 80 ft overall height or 6 - 7 floors.

As points of reference: once you include the setback penthouse on the existing community center, it is 55 ft high. 5333 Connecticut, the tall white building at Military Rd., is 110+ ft high. The 9 story Garfield condominium on Connecticut at Legation St. is about 100 ft high.

The sketch ([here](#)) summarizes these height requirements and diagrams the associated setback requirements that soften the impact of the uppermost floors for pedestrians.

18. Would the new zoning also apply to the side streets off Connecticut Avenue?

No. The new NC zones proposed for Connecticut Avenue do not apply to the low-density, single-family-house side streets off Connecticut Avenue. Their zoning remains unchanged.

19. Would the new buildings at the Civic Core site put undue stress on the sewers and utilities that serve all of us?

No. Throughout the city, all new construction is reviewed by the appropriate District agencies and utilities for adequacy of public facilities to support the proposed development. It is quite common that an applicant for a building permit - whether the developer is a public or private entity - is required to upgrade public infrastructure if the existing facilities, including utilities, are found to be inadequate in some way. In the case of the sewer system, the presence of apartment buildings a couple of blocks away and many commercial uses including restaurants along the Avenue probably means that upgrades to the mains in the street are unlikely to be required. The connections to mains in the street from a development will always be replaced with appropriately sized facilities.

More generally, while our utilities occasionally have suffered from problems, dozens of new buildings have been built throughout the city in the last 20 years, with no indication that they have been the cause of the occasional outages or problems that have occurred.

20. What about parking?

Much of the open space on the current site is eaten up by the 31 surface parking spaces. As Councilmember Frumin has urged, the site could instead provide substantial *below-grade garage* parking, thus freeing up more of this very valuable open space and gardens at the heart of our community for use by people, rather than storage of cars.

21. *Wouldn't redevelopment and new construction at the Civic Core site be harmful for the environment?*

Most demolition today is really more like deconstruction. Existing buildings are usually taken apart and a lot of the pieces are either recycled or carefully sorted and disposed of responsibly. Environmental studies prior to demolition identify and remove hazardous material. Recent demolition of the Diner and Mazza Gallerie have proceeded in that way.

In addition, building housing in transit-rich, walkable locations like the Chevy Chase commercial district is one of the clearest ways for a city to reduce greenhouse gases and fight climate change. The Chevy Chase commercial district is located directly on one main bus line (L2) and several feeder routes and is a 15-minute walk from the Friendship Heights Metro. The alternative is to build in locations where there is more suburban sprawl, more cars, more traffic, and more unnecessary car trips for a quart of milk. That results in more traffic everywhere, more pollution, and more greenhouse gases.

22. *Could the Civic Core site be and feel safer/more secure with a different configuration than at present?*

The current site is centered on an interior plaza that is darker and lonelier than Connecticut Avenue. Especially after dark, many believe that it does not feel safe or welcoming. If the library and community center instead opened up to the heart of our commercial district on Connecticut Avenue (just as, for example, the Avalon Theater does), they would feel much more secure and welcoming.

23. *What are the features of a state-of-the-art library?*

DC Public Libraries (DCPL) has been actively upgrading the District's libraries for the last decade and has included many new features that respond to technology changes and even post-pandemic patterns of work. For example, the new Cleveland Park Library, rebuilt in 2018, includes more light and space, large meeting and collaboration rooms and smaller study rooms, and better facilities for modern technology (printing and scanning, high speed WIFI, etc.). The city has surveyed our preferences for the new library. The current ANC survey when circulated will also provide an opportunity to express your desires for the new Chevy Chase Library. Take the survey, let them know what is important to you.

New DCPL libraries are the pride of their neighborhoods



24. *What would a state-of-the-art community center be like?*

In 2018, after an extensive study, our ANC urged the city to include in a new community center such features as a fitness center, meeting/games/party rooms, a half-court gym, childcare room and indoor play area, quiet lounge, activity/tech lounge, dance/yoga/Pilates studio, arts and crafts space, rooftop garden or greenhouse, and more. The city has surveyed preferences for a community center, too. The current ANC survey when circulated will provide still another opportunity to express your desires for the new community center. Take the survey, let them know what is important to you.

25. *What is “surplusing”? Is it a good idea?*

This refers to a DC law that gives the Council some oversight over the disposition of public property by the executive branch. The Mayor is required to justify the disposition and also adhere to certain standards in a redevelopment (e.g, minimum amounts of affordable housing).

Today, the District does not typically build housing itself, and its track record of building and maintaining public housing has not been good. Instead, the District solicits private partners to build housing, which frequently incorporates a mix of affordable and market-rate units in order to make the project financially viable. The ‘surplusing’ legislation requires the Council to review that process when it includes disposition of public property.

The Small Area Plan adopted by the Council, requires that redevelopment of the site include a new library and community center and ample outdoor recreation and conversation space, so those parts of the property will remain in public use. With those public uses ensured, the remaining portion of the property could be designated as surplus, i.e., “no longer required for public purposes,” so that it can be developed for housing. In the end the redevelopment would include all the public uses currently present at the site, plus the added public benefit of making a contribution toward alleviating the housing crisis.

Of course it is a good idea to have oversight – another set of eyes – on the process that leverages public assets to achieve a public good. There is a lot at stake. But there is nothing inherently wrong with a disposition process that includes an RFP for the redevelopment that requires replacing the public facilities, while providing much-needed housing, including affordable housing. Just the opposite: not only is it a good idea, but it is also a great opportunity.

26. *Wouldn’t developers just build on the Civic Core site to maximize their profits, rather than do what is best for our neighborhood or our city?*

The Small Area Plan, adopted by the Council as official city policy/law, requires a modern library and community center, ample outdoor recreation and conversation space, and (affordable) housing. Submissions in response to the RFP will offer concrete proposals on how to achieve all of those goals. Such submissions could come from for-profit or non-profit developers. If the winning proposal is from a for-profit developer, that firm, like any firm, will of course try to make a profit. (Virtually all of our homes were also built by developers who were trying to make a profit.) But regardless of whether a for-profit or nonprofit developer wins, the arrangement will be a familiar type of arrangement in which each side contributes something of value. The city will agree to a sale or long-term lease of property, in return for a developer’s commitment to include affordable housing that

would otherwise never get built. By saving the land-acquisition costs, more affordable housing will be built than could otherwise be accommodated.

27. What about the covenant on the back half of the Civic Core lot, which prohibits apartment buildings on that part of the lot?

When the Chevy Chase Land Co. sold the back half of the Civic Core lot to the city in 1909, it included a covenant requiring that no apartments ever be built on that lot. In those pre-zoning days, any other use of that lot – public or private, commercial or residential – was permitted. The covenant, if legally valid today (a big if), would require moving apartments to the front of the lot (which is not subject to the covenant) and pushing the library and community center toward the back – the opposite of what would be the best development plan.

Under settled legal principles, a court today would likely find the no-apartment covenant invalid if it ever faced the question. But Councilmember Frumin has introduced legislation that would make this explicit and invalidate the no-apartment covenant on this lot (and other legislation would do the same in a broader area). We should support that legislation, which would simply eliminate an arbitrary obstacle to sound planning of the Civic Core site. For a more detailed discussion, see [here](#).

28. Why do people say there a racial aspect to this, none of us are racist in the slightest?

Increasing or reducing the amount of affordable housing in the District disproportionately impacts African American residents. In that sense, there is a racial dimension to the issue here.

***Questions?
Interested in participating?***

Contact us at info@NeighborsforHousingEquity.org