

My name is Ronald Baker.

In 2002, I was lucky enough to buy the row house which I had rented since 1990.

In 2014, I was one of the founders of *Neighbors Against Downzoning*, an all volunteer group of friends, neighbors and home owners in Washington, D.C., formed to defend home owner zoning rights.

Our group was established in response to efforts by another group to have the Lanier Heights neighborhood of Adams Morgan re-zoned downward from an R-5-B zone to an R-4 zone. We oppose such residential downzoning due to the severe loss of property rights -- and property value -- that it will inflict on home owners. Our petition in opposition to residential downzoning currently has more than fifty signatures, primarily from Lanier Heights row house owners.

Although the application for a Lanier Heights map amendment has not been filed yet, we anticipate this will happen in the near future. I am here tonight to speak against the changes proposed in case 14-11 both as a concerned citizen of the District of Columbia and as a row house owner who will suffer a double blow to my property rights and economic security if the proposed R-4 downzoning is enacted and then followed by a map amendment to reclassify Lanier Heights from R-5-B to R-4.

While it is understandable that home owners are concerned about what they see as under regulated over development in row house neighborhoods, particularly when it comes to pop-up developments in R-4 zones, the proposed remedies put forth in case 14-11 are an extreme over reaction to a relatively minor problem.

The few instances of so-called “ugly pop-ups” that have captured the attention of the local media and spawned a near hysterical reaction among some home owners must be weighed against the more numerous instances of pop-up developments that range from the frequently unremarkable to the occasionally well received. The social and economic value of the majority of these developments, both to home owners, their neighborhoods and the city at large is significant and should not be sacrificed lightly.

I urge the Zoning Commissioners to reject any new restrictions proposed under case 14-11.

Sincerely,

Ronald Baker

Ronald Baker
Lanier Heights row house owner
[Neighbors Against Downzoning](#)

The last couple of days have produced many reader comments on this case at the blogs **Greater Greater Washington** ([*DC may limit condos and building heights in some row house zones. Is this a good idea?*](#)) and **Prince of Petworth** ([*Unintended consequence of anti-pop-up proposal*](#)). A few of the more concise postings from these blogs are reproduced below.

I don't support significant restrictions on breaking up existing row houses. Many such buildings are very large, and it is uneconomic for all but the wealthiest households to own and maintain such buildings... (RL, GGW 1-13-15)

I'm much more willing to support a comprehensive design review requirement than I am an outright ban on popups. There are a couple of popups on my block that have mimicked the existing structures to such an extent that it's hard to tell that the extra story isn't original. (JS, GGW 1-13-15)

Once people are settled they don't want any changes, and then everyone else is effectively priced out of a neighborhood and you don't have the tax base for needed improvements. It's tough enough to develop in the district. More restrictions aren't needed. (EC, GGW 1-13-15)

Downzoning is not going to make single family homes and row homes more affordable in the district. On the contrary, it is likely going to increase the housing costs in DC, as supply will be depressed in the face of increasing demand. (MEH, GGW 1-13-15)

I am buying a rowhouse in a R-4 neighborhood coming from outside of DC. I want the freedom and ability to create a third or fourth condo if I so choose. For those seeking to purchase a reasonably sized / priced home in DC with value, this is an economically viable strategy; buy a rowhouse, renovate to suit my preferences, create condos, sell condos, pay down the mortgage and recoup construction costs, end up with a spacious home that suits my preference at an affordable mortgage. I cannot be the only one to have thought of this. (JOHN, GGW 1-13-15)

I agree that restrictions on R-4 conversions are tantamount to a downzoning and that the effect of the proposed text amendments will have a significant impact on the price of housing in these neighborhoods because it will suppress supply. (KB, GGW 1-13-15)

It sounds like what is being proposed is a subsidy for wealthy households -- i.e. having the city forego the added tax revenue from a denser development by limiting land values in order to facilitate purchases by high-income families/individuals. The cost is also passed along to smaller/less wealthy households in terms of reduced supply of studios, 1 BR and 2 BR apartments. (RTA, GGW 1-14-15)

I don't understand why DC would willfully limit density in a large part of the city that also happens to be mostly transit / metro friendly and adjacent to downtown. If anything, it seems like this is the area that should increase density - and increase it by a lot. (DLG, GGW 1-14-15)

Just a reminder: There are far more single-family homes in the District than there are couples with children to live in them. The majority of single-family homes in DC are occupied by non-related roommates or childless couples. We don't have a shortage of family-sized units, if anything, we have a glut of them. (CTD, PoP, 1-14-15)

I haven't seen that many pop-ups that I would call truly ugly. There are a few I don't like but most seem pretty average. What I read on PoPville and other blogs is this weird idea that every development that isn't well "above average" is somehow a disgrace to the city or an insult to the neighborhood. The harsh judgments usually come from people who don't think enough money was spent on the project: as if every critic is a multimillionaire or identifies with multimillionaire tastes. (AoA, PoP, 1-14-15)

My neighbor bought the victorian as a three-unit building as a single guy in the very early 1980s. He didn't need an entire house, and couldn't afford to live in it by himself, but liked the idea of the investment potential. So, he lived on the first floor and rented out the two units upstairs. After he married, when he and his wife wanted to have children, they "annexed" the middle unit to make the lower two floors a large 2.5 bedroom property. When they had another child later, they "annexed" the top floor, converted it into a master suite, and used the whole house. After the children moved away, they converted the first floor back to an apartment and downsized to the upper unit. They are now older, own the house outright, and thinking about moving back to the first floor to avoid the stairs and either renting the large upper unit or converting it back to two smaller apartments. He often says he's been in that house over 35 years, and he's adapted it to whatever phase of life he was in at the time, and loved it. But, it sounds like that might not be allowable if this bill passes. (anonymous, PoP, 1-14-15)

Supporters of this proposal think that prohibiting pop up conversions will make rowhomes more affordable. It won't. Developers will still win bidding wars, except that instead of getting two 550 – 650K units, you get renovated row houses that sell for 850K plus. (JS, PoP, 1-14-15)

My next door neighbors moved out of their row house a few years ago when their two kids reached school age. They said they needed more space, but instead of popping up their row house for \$250,000 they bought a detached dwelling in far upper NW for \$1.1 million — in an area with better schools. So it's schools more than space that drives the great family exodus towards the suburbs (those inside and outside the District proper) at least for those who can afford it. (Anon, PoP, 1-14-15)

The reason that "families" by which, let's be real here, people mean your ideal two parent-two kid family, can't afford row houses is that the demand for rowhouse living exceeds supply. It's not that "too many" of them are being converted into multifamily buildings. Should we start prohibiting childless couples from bidding on row houses? They have more disposable income and can outbid "families" after all. (JS, PoP, 1-14-15)

Objections to "ugly pop-ups" conceal some deeper objectives of "zoning reformers" — they don't want any increase in density that might create congestion, noise and competition for on street parking. Arguments about "aesthetics" and "saving family housing" are just eyewash. (AoA, PoP, 1-14-15)