

ZTA 20-07 -- Comments From the Epicenter

Karen Cordry, 10705 Torrance Drive, Silver Spring, MD 20902; karenc425@aol.com. 301-933-3640.

My name is Karen Cordry. I am President of the Kensington Heights Civic Association (“KHCA”) – which is the designation for the community surrounding the Westfield Wheaton Mall on the south and west sides (and extending south to Plyers Mill). I have been involved with KHCA for much of the time since I moved to my current address in 2001. (Before then, I lived on Alberti Drive and on Dennis Avenue, so I have been in the general Wheaton area since 1983). In addition to my involvement in my own homeowner’s association, I was also a member of the Wheaton Urban District Advisory Commission (“WUDAC”) for several years and Chair for two years. I have very much appreciated the ability to live next to a major shopping area, to have the Metro and bus lines within a 5-10 minute walk – and still to be in a quiet, friendly, low-key neighborhood so I have tried to give back to that community through my civic involvement over the years. I have also been involved with the Sierra Club for 30 plus years so I also have a deep interest in, and abiding concern for, the need to integrate climate change and its adverse effects into all of our ongoing activities.

As President of KHCA, I quickly learned of proposed ZTA 20-07 after it was introduced. The concept of Missing Middle (“MM”) housing was not one that I was familiar with before this time but, since learning of the ZTA, I have tried to investigate the idea and how it could be implemented – and whether doing so is feasible within the existing communities to which this ZTA would apply. In that regard, KHCA would be ground zero for any such proposal – the 1-mile radius for the ZTA’s coverage (if measured as the crow flies), would cover the vast majority of the of 1,000 or so homes in our community. Of those homes, a substantial majority are brick houses, largely built in the 1950s or so, ranging from quite small 1-story Cape Cods to more substantial story-and-a half house, to 2-story or larger buildings. It would appear that almost all of these were built in multi-home development projects, in that on many blocks all of the homes are built to the same basic structure with only minor design variations. These were presumably designed, built, and sold at the same time on a major piece of vacant land with the costs of development, building, and sales spread out over that whole group of homes. These homes remain today as the backbone of our community in solid, well-maintained structure that can likely last for decades more.

KHCA also has a number of townhouse communities that have been built at various times over the more recent decades on some of the remaining open areas. In addition, there are a number of larger single-family homes, built in relatively recent years, most of which were again constructed with a group of several houses at the same time where there was space – such as when Kensington Orchids closed and its land became available for development. And, finally, in the last few years, there have been a small number of “one-off” homes built where an existing, relatively small, home was acquired, demolished, and a much bigger single-family home was built. Most of KHCA is, I believe, subject to R-60 zoning. Some parts do appear to have larger lots and may be in the R-90 zone. Perhaps the most important point for this purpose is that there are few, if any, vacant lots within KHCA. Accordingly, any new building can proceed at all only be tearing down what is already there.¹ As such, this inherently means that the cost of construction for a new MM house will be substantially larger than if one is starting with a new lot.

¹ One other possibility, at least for larger existing houses, is retaining the existing facades, gutting the interior and dividing up the interior space so that it is separated between two or more units with facilities such as kitchens, living space, and entrances duplicated for each unit. This would, at least, have the virtue of not pushing up the cost of new housing by requiring the purchase and then destruction of what is already there but most designs shown for these projects appears to envision new co

In looking at sales in this community, it would appear that the bulk of them over the last couple years have been in the range of the low to mid \$400s up to the low to mid \$600s, and some, for the smaller houses have been in the \$300,000 range. For Montgomery County, that means housing in this community is already in the range of what passes for affordable housing. One of our concerns, accordingly, is how to incorporate the MM housing types into this area without simply creating a substantially bigger house than was there before, with access to only a portion of the former yard area – and with each new unit selling at or above the prior price for the whole house and yard due to the high costs of replacing existing homes. Such a result may provide some value to our goals in that it would create more units of housing but it is difficult to see how it helps with affordability. If anything, it would tend to drive up the prices of existing homes and, in the process, perhaps push out those with relatively lower incomes who can afford the existing smaller homes. And all of this is, of course, without taking into account concerns, about infrastructure, parking, stormwater management, school capacity and the like, if it really is possible to achieve significantly greater density.

The other possibility is that all of these concerns and issues may make this approach seem like more work than it is worth for developers trying to do these projects on a one-off basis for a single lot or two. As Council Member Jawando states, there have only been a relative handful of projects done in Minneapolis to date after it approved an ordinance along these lines. This may well be an area where, as in Minneapolis, the government itself should be involved in terms of finding and making available lots, setting up acceptable criteria, determining how to expedite desirable projects and the like.

My bottom line is that I would like to see this concept be able to work and to create good, well-conceived and implemented housing options in the Wheaton community. I am very concerned, though, that the current ZTA is too blunt of an instrument to achieve that goal. I strongly agree with the comments from the Planning Board that this needs to be done as part of the County's overall planning goals. I also, and KHCA as a community, have signed on to the Coalition letter that raised a large number of concerns and specific questions that need to be addressed.

The best way to reach that goal and resolve those questions, I believe, is to convene a task force with community members, planners, housing personnel from the county – and builders who can talk about the practical aspects of this – to really dig into what is needed to make these projects workable and compatible with the community. Such a group can also look at some of the other options that the COVID epidemic has brought to light in terms of the lower need for retail and office space and the possibility that such buildings, which are usually already situated in dense areas close to Metro, could be fairly readily converted into housing space. In any event, such a task force, I believe, should make it possible to arrive at a win-win situation. Absent those more detailed discussion, this proposal may create the worst of all worlds – a great deal of fear, concern, and opposition from those affected thereby without, in the end, even accomplishing very much in terms of getting projects built.

Thank you for your consideration.