

Deborah Mason Testimony

CCB#2400544

Ways and Means Committee Hearing, 10 September 2024

Councilman Costello, members of the committee. Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony on CCB# 24-0544. As a District 3 resident, I have an interest in the continued prosperity of the Harford Road corridor, and I applaud Councilman Dorsey's desire to ensure that its businesses and residents thrive alike. However, I do have concerns over how the bill seeks to achieve that end.

First, I do not understand why the Councilman proposes a 500' width overlay on both sides of Harford Road. I realize that he wants to encourage the development of multi-family housing, along with mixed commercial use. However, the question remains: Why 500'? Why not 250'? Or 150'? Is it even necessary at all, given that nearly all of the corridor is already designated C1, C2, C3, OR-1, or OR-2, all of which designate multi-family housing as a permissible use? Given that this would be a 180° shift in policy from the current ordinance, wouldn't it make sense to take a more limited approach in order to evaluate the impact of the new policy and avoid unintended consequences?

If passed in its current form, the overlay would remove the current prohibition on converting single family homes in R-1 through R-6 residential areas—the same goal as Councilman Dorsey's Abundant Housing Act. As with that act, I have concerns that houses within the 500' overlay would be targeted by investors and speculators, to the detriment of the neighborhoods in which they are located. Northeast Baltimore is known for its cohesive, strong neighborhoods, which are characterized primarily by single-family houses (both owner-occupied and rented). As Councilman Dorsey stated at his 2 July informational meeting, the neighborhoods surrounding the Harford Road corridor have only a 1% vacancy rate—surely a testament to the success and attraction of these neighborhoods. However, when I twice asked Councilman Dorsey's office for clarification on the purpose of the 500' overlay (see attachment 1, correspondence with Councilman Dorsey's office regarding 500' overlay), I received no reply, leaving me to wonder if there is any justification for it at all, or, if there is one, why isn't it being shared?

The second concern I have with the bill is the removal of any community input at the beginning of the development process. Currently, the Lauraville Business District (LBD) Urban Renewal Plan establishes a Community Review Panel (CRP), whose purpose is "to ensure that the communities most impacted by a proposed development will have the first opportunity for input." The members of the CRP are representatives from the surrounding neighborhood associations. The Plan contains several provisions that ensure that the CRP is deeply involved in the permitting process. As a result, the CRP is instrumental in both informing the neighborhoods of potential residential and commercial development and providing community feedback.

Far from being inconsistent with Councilman Dorsey's goals, the CRP has worked with developers to create new spaces that will benefit the residents and businesses in the LBD. For example, the CRP provided useful review for The Enolia, an apartment complex with retail space that will house more than 400 Morgan State University upper class and married students. That complex is currently under construction on Harford Road. Next door, at the suggestion of the CRP to the Enolia developers, the historic Markley building will be preserved and used as a retail incubator.

Under the proposed overlay, there would be no such community review. Instead, as the Councilman said at the 2 July meeting, the design would be entirely up to the developer, so long as it complies with relevant zoning requirements, and the only opportunity for community feedback would be at BMZA hearings. In sum, people in the surrounding neighborhoods who would be affected by developments in the overlay area would have great difficulty in contributing to the future of their communities. I would have concerns with any plan in any district to remove community input into such an important process, **but I am especially concerned when it occurs in this particular district.** For reasons that I hope will be clear, I have thought long and hard before bringing this up in a public forum.

In general, if a community needs help with a zoning application, they can turn to their councilmember for support, advice, and guidance. However, I believe that Councilman Dorsey's actions belie his disregard for those who disagree with him, and I further believe that communities in his district with legitimate concerns regarding changes to their neighborhoods will not have the representation they need and deserve. He has stated in public meetings that he will vote according to his own beliefs, even if the majority of his constituents disagree. Additionally, **Councilman Dorsey has used social media to attack people, including me, who have opposed parts of his legislative agenda or supported his**

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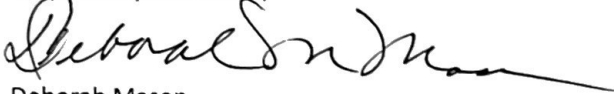
**opponent** (see, e.g., Attachment 2, Councilman Dorsey's Reddit comments and my email to him). In my particular case, he not only spread false statements about me, but he identified my house with sufficient specificity that it could easily be identified. And, perhaps coincidentally, before the primary election all of the signs on my street to which he objected in his post were not only knocked down, but were twisted or broken beyond use, including the "We Believe" sign Councilman Dorsey referred to when describing my property.

Frankly, I have no reason to think that I won't end up being attacked on Reddit or another platform after this testimony, but I believe this is an important enough issue to take that risk. The neighborhoods on both sides of Harford Road deserve to have input into decisions affecting their community, and they deserve to have their concerns taken seriously.

For these reasons, I hope the Committee takes these concerns into serious consideration when reporting on the bill.

Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Deborah Mason", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Deborah Mason

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Attachment 1, Page 1

Fw: Thank You For Attending!

From: [REDACTED]

To: corey.paige@baltimorecity.gov  
[REDACTED]

Date: Monday, 29 July 2024 at 13:43 GMT-4

Hello Corey,

I hope this email finds you well. I sent the following email on 3 July, the day after the Councilman's meeting regarding the overlay, asking for the rationale for the 500' width for the overlay on both sides of Harford. Unfortunately, I haven't received an answer. Would you be able to provide me with the justification for the 500'? Since this is such a key element of the overlay, I think it is important to understand the reasoning behind it.

Thank you very much for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Deborah Mason

----- Forwarded message -----

From: [REDACTED]

To: Murray, Melissa (City Council) <Melissa.Murray@baltimorecity.gov>

Sent: Wednesday, 3 July 2024 at 14:59:42 GMT-4

Subject: Re: Thank You For Attending!

Hello,

I have a question: why have the overlay go 500' from either side of Harford Road? Is there evidence that 500' is the optimum? If so, could you please direct me to it? Wouldn't 250' provide ample space for multi family housing, while still preserving the unique character of the neighborhoods along the corridor? (A character that appears fairly popular, given the 1% vacancy rate.)

I also want to clarify that I personally believe in multi family housing, especially when it is linked to mixed commercial use. I lived in Europe for 15 years, and I especially like the Haussmannian street design in Paris, which promotes a diversity of commerce and residents. However, I am not convinced that allowing developers free rein is the best way to get good, thriving communities. I believe that there needs to be better planning and more community input into such a radical change to the zoning system.

Thank you.

Deborah Mason  
Sent from my iPhone

On Jul 3, 2024, at 12:02, Murray, Melissa (City Council) <Melissa.Murray@baltimorecity.gov> wrote:

Good Afternoon,

Thank you for coming out last night for what turned out to be a very lively, informative conversation on the Harford Road Overlay District bill. Please, please feel free to send any

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questions, comments or concerns you might have by replaying directly to this email. We welcome your feedback.

Council. from the evening, as well as a as it stands in the

Have a great holiday!

<Outlook-  
i3dimben.png>  
Baltimore City  
Council

**Melissa Murray**

Outreach Assistant  
Councilman Ryan Dorsey  
Baltimore City Council, District 3

(410)-396-4812

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Attachment 2, Page 1

dork\_amuck · 2d

His opponent has a real big knot of yard signs right there in the most expensive (non-lake-overlooking) part of Mayfield. I wonder what she says to them that they so much seem to want to hear...

... ↩ Reply ↑ 8 ↓



ryandorseylsok · 1d

It's ten yard signs at six houses.

Three republican households, including one with a blue lives matter flag, and one who is a known crazy in the neighborhood.

Two Democrat households that hate me because I am very pro-renter and pro-housing development, and they are wild NIMBY's, one of whom is the quintessential liberal boomer white lady with the "in this house we believe" sign but then stands opposed to anything that makes her uncomfortable while advancing those espoused values.

One house with zero registered voters.

I have yet to meet a yard sign that can vote.

... ↩ ↑ 15 ↓

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Attachment 2, Page 2

## Your recent tweet

Deborah Mason [REDACTED]

Tue, Apr 2, 2024 at 8:02 PM

To: "Dorsey, Ryan (City Council)" <ryan.dorsey@baltimorecity.gov>

Cc: Nick.Mosby@baltimorecity.gov, "Leach, Faith (Mayor's Office)" <Faith.leach@baltimorecity.gov>, Vote Margo <votemargobrunersettles@gmail.com>

[REDACTED]

Hi Ryan,

Someone was kind enough to share your tweet regarding the Margo Bruner-Settles signs on Erdman. I assume that I am the Democratic wild NIMBY who is "the quintessential liberal boomer white lady."

Frankly, if I were running for office and noticed that I had lost the support of someone who had supported me in my previous two runs for office (including money donations, lawn signs, and holding a coffee in her home) and had, at my request, provided legislative testimony in favor of a bill I had introduced, I would stop to ask her why. I certainly would not resort to such Trumpian tactics as *ad hominem* attacks and publicly airing false assumptions. Nor would I describe her house in a tweet with such specificity that anyone with an axe to grind could find her and possibly do her or her property harm.

Frankly, your "Abundant Housing Act" was not the reason why I stopped supporting you, although it certainly confirmed my much earlier decision. It is, however, highly emblematic of the many issues I have with you and your leadership style. Here are a few:

1. You represent your own beliefs, even if they are detrimental to your constituents.
2. You disregard the legitimate concerns and questions of your constituents. Instead of addressing them, you attack your constituents as NIMBYs or bigots or crazy.
3. You see compromise as surrender and critiques as attacks, instead of as routes to more thoughtful discussion and legislation.
4. You try to blame others for your actions (see, e.g., your emails to [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] re: Harford Road, as well as my response).
5. You appear to have alienated so many of your colleagues on the Council and in City government that you are no longer an effective advocate for your constituents. Indeed, in conversations with several of your colleagues and city employees, the adjective "petulant" was used to describe your behavior—and not by me.

In sum, I have come to realize that you are inherently anti-democratic, to the detriment of NE Baltimore. That is why I no longer support you.

Best regards,

Deborah Mason