

June 12, 2023

Councilwoman Sharon G. Middleton
Chair, Economic & Community Development Committee
Baltimore City Council
Baltimore City Hall, Room 532
100 Holliday Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21202
sharon.middleton@baltimorecity.gov

Re: Testimony of Historic Sharp Leadenhall on CC22-0296 - Rezoning 810 Leadenhall Street:
OPPOSE

Dear Councilwoman Middleton and Committee Members:

My name is Betty Bland Thomas and I am a longtime, active resident in the Historic Sharp-Leadenhall community. I am currently President of the South Baltimore Partnership. At the time that this Commission adopted the Sharp-Leadenhall Master Plan I was president of the Sharp-Leadenhall Planning Committee and very engaged in the planning process. This property is within the boundaries of the Sharp-Leadenhall Master Plan which we ask you to include in the record. <https://planning.baltimorecity.gov/sites/default/files/SharpLeadenhall.pdf>

We oppose this bill and ask you to vote against it. Our community is not opposed to progress. But too often "progress" has disregarded and erased us. We are FOR equity and progress that includes our legacy families. We are FOR affordable housing as required by the Master Plan. We are FOR the survival of our historic Black community.

This bill is not consistent with the Sharp Leadenhall Master Plan and is being rushed through with little or no real consultation with our community about the rezoning. There has not been an opportunity for residents of our community to discover the reason this bill was filed to rezone 810 Leadenhall Street from IMU to TOD4, when the current zoning already allows apartments as well as other "mixed uses." The Planning Commission's justification for the rezoning was incorrect on the facts and unjust.

Sharp Leadenhall is unique and holds a special place in Baltimore history. Our community was founded in the 1770's by free Black people and German immigrants.. It was home to influential Black churches and leading abolitionists. Frederick Douglass worshipped here. Our late Congressman Elijah Cummings spent part of his childhood here. But most of our community was destroyed by highway construction and urban renewal. Our property was taken by eminent domain and sold to White buyers as Dollar Houses." We have constantly had to fight to preserve this community.

You can read more about this history here: Sharp Leadenhall, <https://chap.baltimorecity.gov/sharp-leadenhall>; "A Historic Neighborhood Fights to Protect and here "Exploring the Peninsula's Historic Black Community"

We oppose this bill for a number of reasons and believe that the Planning Commission recommendation was legally wrong and not supported by the evidence.

- 1. The current zoning already allows the developer to build 139 apartments in a 60 foot t apartment building.** The developer wants more. The change to TOD4 zoning would allow a building at least 100 feet tall and a very wide range of uses, including a hotel. If the rezoning is approved, neither we nor the Council will have much say in what they build.
- 2. There has not been a "change in the character" of the surrounding neighborhood that required to justify this kind of piecemeal "spot zoning."** At the Planning Commission hearing, you could tell that the Commissioners had a hard time coming up with a "change." It is because nothing has changed surrounding 810 Leadenhall Street since 2017 when it was zoned IMU-1 ---- and for years before that. Everything is still there as is: Martini Lutheran Church and parking lot across Leadenhall Street, Sharp Leadenhall Apartments and rowhouses across Henrietta Street, the historic little rowhouses in Little Montgomery, the church on Sharp Street that was redeveloped into condominiums. The Light Rail is right where it was in 2017! The stadiums were right there on the other side of I-395.
- 3. The "change" the Planning Commission came up with to justify the rezoning to TOD-4 that several properties in around Cross Street had been rezoned TOD4.** As one neighbor said to the Planning staff and Commission at the hearing, "You just keep cavalierly describing this as "just down the street." But that is another part of the neighborhood, almost a half mile away from 810 Leadenhall.
- 4. Two wrongs don't make a right.** The piecemeal TOD4 rezoning that the City gave another developer helped cause gentrification in the Cross Street area. Hundreds of small one bedroom apartments have already been built there for young singles that can afford high rent. *Rezoning causing gentrification in one part of a neighborhood should not be considered a "change" used to justify spreading the same kind of gentrification to other parts of the neighborhood.*
- 5. Increased residential development and population isn't a "change" since 2017 --- it was contemplated at the time of the 2004 Master Plan.** We are not against growth and are not against new housing. When we worked with the City on the Master Plan, we could all foresee that new development and gentrification were starting to spill over from Federal Hill to vacant underutilized properties in Sharp Leadenhall. That is why a key vision of the Master Plan is "high-density infill construction, bringing more residents to the neighborhood and *creating opportunities for affordable units*, while maintaining the existing fabric." The Master Plan specifically addresses projects like 810 Leadenhall:

"New housing construction include an affordable component...the existing Sharp Leadenhall urban renewal plan will be amended to required affordable units to be included with new residential development above a certain size."

6. The Sharp Leadenhall Master Plan is very relevant to the rezoning decision but was ignored by the Planning Commission. As included in my written testimony to the Planning Commission, the Sharp Leadenhall Master Plan requires affordable housing so we can preserve our historic African American community, history and culture. *The 810 Leadenhall property is squarely within the Master Plan Area.* But when a Commissioner asked about this, Councilman Costello dismissed the Master Plan in a misleading way, stating that a neighborhood Master Plan, even though approved by the Planning Commission, is unlike an Urban Renewal Plan, it can override zoning and that the property was not in an Urban Renewal or CHAP area. After that, the Master Plan was improperly ignored, or not even considered, by the Planning Commission.

As a matter of fact, there was a Sharp Leadenhall Urban Renewal Plan. Unfortunately, the City allowed it to expire, without our knowing it, and the Inclusionary Housing law was also allowed to lapse. But the Master Plan is still in place and is posted on the Planning Department website. Should it be so lightly disregarded by the City and by developers who come into our community? Isn't it still relevant to a decision by the Planning Commission and City Council on a developer request for a rezoning?

7. The Commission was supposed to think about equity as well as "population change" in deciding whether the rezoning is appropriate --- but it did not consider that long time Black residents are being priced out of our own neighborhood. The staff and Commission focused on additional people in *Otterbein*. They didn't look specifically at race and income data to see who is moving in and who is being priced out of Sharp Leadenhall. We have always welcomed new people but we want it to remain a diverse neighborhood. We want it to include the very people who have fought to maintain Sharp Leadenhall all these years after the community was nearly destroyed by the highway and eminent domain.

8. Nothing that has been built in Sharp Leadenhall is for us. The rezoning will hurt our neighborhood, not help it. The Planning Commission ignored our opposition and didn't ever consider the ways the rezoning without affordable housing will contribute to gentrification and racial displacement. Longtime residents of Sharp Leadenhall making \$40,000 or even \$60,000 a year can't afford that. The amenities in the buildings are not open to us, but their 70 foot high looms over us and we have to put up with the burden of increased traffic and noise. (I know, because I live just across Cross Street and have experienced it).

9. Without affordable housing where will we go? In considering the rezoning, the Planning Commission failed to consider whether it benefits the residents of our neighborhood and other neighborhoods of the city. The developer says his plan fills a "gap" in the market for studio and one bedroom apartments. But all of the new building in Sharp Leadenhall, Federal Hill, and the rest of South Baltimore are the same high rent studio and one-bedroom apartments. Affordable housing is what is really needed in Sharp Leadenhall, the rest of South Baltimore and the City. Should all the value of the rezoning go to the developer? Shouldn't any increase in apartments least be set aside as affordable housing to benefit the community and residents of the City? If we are zoning for TOD, isn't the idea that some of the apartments be affordable to people who can't afford cars and actually use transit? The Sharp Leadenhall community worked hard to preserve

the State to open the Hamburg Street station to the community (and not just Ravens fans). We had no idea it would be used against us.

The IMU1 zoning already allows 139 units. No matter the result here, the developer will get to build new apartments. But as you can see, there are a lot of issues about this project that need to be resolved. If the City Council approves a change to TOD4 zoning for 810 Leadenhall, it will be giving the developer a blank check for some of the most intense zoning available in Baltimore City.

The Sharp Leadenhall community has a track record of partnering with the City and developer to provide affordable housing and plan for equitable, responsible development. In recent years developers have come into Sharp Leadenhall to build what suits their interests without any sensitivity toward the legacy of this historic African American community and the hardships that were done in the past in the name of "progress." We are encouraged that the website of this developer says that they "partner with communities to create positive change." We have not found that to be our experience so far, but we are still hopeful.

We respectfully urge you to vote no on this bill. Despite an unfortunate start, this will allow us all to get a fresh start so that 810 Leadenhall is a positive for all of us.

Submitted by:

Betty Bland Thomas

cc:

Councilman John Bullock – Vice Chair

Councilman Mark Conway

Councilman Ryan Dorsey

Councilman Antonio Glover

Councilwoman Odette Ramos

Councilman Robert Stokes