
CITY OF BALTIMORE

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July 27, 2023

The Honorable President and Members
of the Baltimore City Council
Attn: Natawna B. Austin, Executive Secretary
Room 409, City Hall, 100 N. Holliday Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21202

Re: City Council Bill 23-0351 - Rezoning – 1801 to 1807 Bloomingdale Road and
1800 to 1816 North Rosedale Street

Dear President and City Council Members:

The Law Department reviewed City Council Bill 23-0351 for form and legal sufficiency. The bill changes the zoning for the properties known as 1801 to 1807 Bloomingdale Road (Block 2427, Lots 032 to 035) and 1800 to 1816 North Rosedale Street (Block 2427, Lots 001 to 009) from the R-8 Zoning District to the C-1 Zoning District. The ordinance would take effect 30 days after its enactment.

The Mayor and City Council may permit a piecemeal rezoning *only if* it finds facts sufficient to show either a mistake in the existing zoning classification or a substantial change in the character of the neighborhood. MD Land Use Art., § 10-304(b)(2); Baltimore City Code, Art. 32, §§ 5-508(a) and (b)(1).

The “change-mistake” rule is a rule of the either/or type. The “change” half of the “change-mistake” rule requires that, in order for a piecemeal Euclidean zoning change to be approved, there must be a satisfactory showing that there has been significant and unanticipated change in a relatively well-defined area (the “neighborhood”) surrounding the property in question since its original or last comprehensive rezoning, whichever occurred most recently. The “mistake” option of the rule requires a showing that the underlying assumptions or premises relied upon by the legislative body during the immediately preceding original or comprehensive rezoning were incorrect. In other words, there must be a showing of a mistake of fact. Mistake in this context does not refer to a mistake in judgment.

Rylens Enterprises, 372 Md. at 483.

“It is unquestioned that the City Council has the power to amend its City Zoning Ordinance whenever there has been **such a change in the character and use of a district** since the original

enactment that the **public health, safety, morals, or general welfare would be promoted** by a change in the regulations.” *Cassel v. Mayor and City Council of Baltimore*, 195 Md. 348, 354 (1950) (emphasis added). The Mayor and City Council must find facts of a substantial change in the character and the use of the district since the comprehensive rezoning of the property on June 5, 2017 and that the rezoning will promote the “public health, safety, morals, or general welfare” and not merely advantage the property owner. *Id.* at 358.

As to the substantial change, courts in Maryland want to see facts of a “significant and unanticipated change in a relatively well-defined area.” *Rylins Enterprises*, 372 Md. at 483. The “‘neighborhood’ must be the immediate neighborhood of the subject property, not some area miles away; and the changes must occur in that immediate neighborhood of such a nature as to have affected its character.” *Clayman v. Prince George’s County*, 266 Md. 409, 418 (1972). The changes are required to be physical. *Anne Arundel County v. Bell*, 442 Md. 539, 555 (2015) (citing *Montgomery County v. Woodward & Lothrop*, 280 Md. 686, 712–13 (1977)). However, those physical changes cannot be infrastructure such as sewer or water extension or road widening. *Clayman*, 266 Md. at 419. And the physical changes have to be shown to be unforeseen at the time of the last rezoning. *County Council of Prince George’s County v. Zimmer Development Co.*, 444 Md. 490 (2015). Contemplated growth and density is not sufficient. *Clayman*, 266 Md. at 419.

As to whether the change benefits solely the property owner, courts look, in part, to see if a similar use is nearby such that the community could easily take advantage of the use elsewhere. *Cassel*, 195 Md. at 358 (three other similar uses only a few blocks away lead to conclusion that zoning change was only for private owner’s gain).

Findings of Fact

In determining whether to rezone based on mistake or change in the character of the neighborhood, the City Council is required to make findings of fact on the following matters:

- (i) population change;
- (ii) the availability of public facilities;
- (iii) the present and future transportation patterns;
- (iv) compatibility with existing and proposed development;
- (v) the recommendations of the Planning Commission and the Board of Municipal and Zoning Appeals; and
- (vi) the relationship of the proposed amendment to the City’s plan.

Md. Code, Land Use, § 10-304(b)(1); Baltimore City Code, Art. 32, § 5-508(b)(2) (citing same factors with (v) being “the recommendations of the City agencies and officials,” and (iv) being “the proposed amendment’s consistency with the City’s Comprehensive Master Plan.”).

Article 32 of the City Code also requires Council to consider:

- (i) existing uses of property within the general area of the property in question;
- (ii) the zoning classification of other property within the general area of the property in question;

- (iii) the suitability of the property in question for the uses permitted under its existing zoning classification; and
- (iv) the trend of development, if any, in the general area of the property in question, including changes, if any, that have taken place since the property in question was placed in its present zoning classification.

Baltimore City Code, Art. 32, § 5-508(b)(3).

The Mayor and City Council's decision regarding a piecemeal rezoning is reviewed under the substantial evidence test and should be upheld "if reasoning minds could reasonably reach the conclusion from facts in the record." *City Council of Prince George's Cty. v. Zimmer Dev. Co.*, 444 Md. 490, 510 (2015) (quoting *Cremins v. Cnty. Comm'rs of Washington Cnty.*, 164 Md. App. 426, 438 (2005)); see also *White v. Spring*, 109 Md. App. 692, 699, cert. denied, 343 Md. 680 (1996) ("the courts may not substitute their judgment for that of the legislative agency if the issue is rendered fairly debatable"); accord *Floyd v. County Council of Prince George's County*, 55 Md. App. 246, 258 (1983) ("substantial evidence" means a little more than a 'scintilla of evidence.'").

Spot Zoning

The City must find sufficient facts for a change or mistake because "Zoning is permissible only as an exercise of the police power of the State. When this power is exercised by a city, it is confined by the limitations fixed in the grant by the State and to the accomplishment of the purposes for which the State authorized the city to zone." *Cassel*, 195 Md. at 353.

In piecemeal rezoning bills, like this one, if there is not a factual basis to support the change or the mistake, then rezoning is considered illegal spot zoning. *Id.* at 355. Spot Zoning "has appeared in many cities in America as the result of pressure put upon councilmen to pass amendments to zoning ordinances solely for the benefit of private interests." *Id.* It is the "arbitrary and unreasonable devotion of a small area within a zoning district to a use which is inconsistent with the use to which the rest of the district is restricted." *Id.* It is "therefore, universally held that a 'spot zoning' ordinance, which singles out a parcel of land within the limits of a use district and marks it off into a separate district for the benefit of the owner, thereby permitting a use of that parcel inconsistent with the use permitted in the rest of the district, is invalid if it is not in accordance with the comprehensive zoning plan and is merely for private gain." *Id.*

However, "a use permitted in a small area, which is not inconsistent with the use to which the larger surrounding area is restricted, although it may be different from that use, is not 'spot zoning' when it does not conflict with the comprehensive plan but is in harmony with an orderly growth of a new use for property in the locality." *Id.* The example given was "small districts within a residential district for use of grocery stores, drug stores and barber shops, and even gasoline filling stations, for the accommodation and convenience of the residents of the residential district." *Id.* at 355-356.

Thus, to avoid spot zoning, the Mayor and City Council must show how the contemplated use is consistent with the character of the neighborhood. See, e.g., *Tennison v. Shomette*, 38 Md. App. 1, 8 (1977) (cited with approval in *Rylyns*, 372 Md. at 546-47; accord *Mayor and City Council of Baltimore v. Byrd*, 191 Md. 632, 640 (1948)).

Planning Commission Recommendation

The Planning Department Staff Report (“Report”) supports this rezoning. Based on the Planning Report, the Planning Commission adopted a resolution recommending approval of the zoning change proposed by Council Bill 23-0351. The Report, using the factors required by the State and City zoning codes, found that there had been a substantial change in the character and use of the neighborhood since the last rezoning when the properties were changed to R-8 in order to match the zoning for the area to the existing development of the properties. Following the comprehensive rezoning, all but one of the lots on North Rosedale Street were cleared. Three of the four properties on Bloomingdale Road have vacant building notices. 1800 North Rosedale Street is a mostly vacant building except for a small portion being used as a liquor store (a non-conforming use). The use of a portion of the building as a store prevents it from being issued a vacant building notice. The only occupied structure on Bloomingdale Road is 1807 Bloomingdale, which houses a religious institution. The subject properties are owned by separate individuals, including several lots owned by the City.

As stated, in the last comprehensive rezoning the subject properties were rezoned from B-2-2 (Community Business District) to R-8 (Rowhouse Residential). Council Bill 23-0351 seeks to change the zoning of these properties to C-1, which are commercial clusters or pedestrian-oriented corridors of commercial uses that serve the immediate neighborhood. A variety of residential uses is also permitted in C-1 zoning. The Report states that the Northwest community action neighborhood where these properties are located lost 500 residents between 2010 and 2020. The subject properties are located in a transition area between commercial properties on West North Avenue and the west side of Bloomingdale Road, and the residential community to the south. The Report states:

For the surrounding neighborhood, the redevelopment of this block is immediate goal, and returning these properties to commercial zoning will provide a better chance at returning them to productive use. Staff notes that residential use (including all-residential options) are available under the proposed C-1 zone.


Finally, the Report contains a summary equity analysis of the proposed zoning change.

The City Council is required to hold a quasi-judicial public hearing with regard to the bill where it will hear and weigh the evidence as presented in: (1) the Planning Report and other agency reports; (2) testimony from the Planning Department and other City agency representatives; and (3) testimony from members of the public and interested persons. After weighing the evidence presented and submitted into the record before it, the Council is required to make findings of fact for each property about the factors in Sections 10-304 and 10-305 of the Land Use Article of the Maryland Code and Section 5-508 of Article 32 of the Baltimore City Code. If, after its investigation of the facts, the Committee makes findings which support: (1) a mistake in the comprehensive zoning; and (2) a new zoning classification for the properties, it may adopt these findings and the legal requirements for granting the rezoning would be met.

Additionally, certain procedural requirements apply to this bill beyond those discussed above because a change in the zoning classification of a property is deemed a “legislative authorization.” Baltimore City Code, Art. 32, § 5-501(2)(iii). Specifically, notice of the City Council hearing must be given by publication in a newspaper of general circulation in the City, by posting in a conspicuous place on the property and by first-class mail, on forms provided by the Zoning Administrator, to each person who appears on the tax records of the City as an owner of the property to be rezoned. Baltimore City Code, Art. 32, § 5-601(b). The notice of the City Council hearing must include the date, time, place and purpose of the hearing, as well as the address of the subject property or a drawing or description of the boundaries of the area affected by the proposed rezoning and the name of the applicant. Baltimore City Code, Art. 32, § 5-601(c). The posted notices must be at least 3 feet by 4 feet in size, placed at a prominent location near the sidewalk or right-of-way for pedestrians to view, and at least one sign must be visible from each of the property’s street frontages. City Code, Art., § 5-601(d). The published and mailed notices must be given at least 15 days before the hearing; the posted notice must be at least 30 days before the public hearing. Baltimore City Code, Art. 32, § 5-601(e), (f).

The bill is the appropriate method for the City Council to review the facts and make the determination as to whether the legal standard for rezoning has been met. Assuming the required findings are made at the hearing and that all procedural requirements are satisfied, the Law Department can approve the bill for form and legal sufficiency.

Sincerely yours,



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