
CITY OF BALTIMORE

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Mayor



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October 28, 2020

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

Re: City Council Bill 20-0618 Rezoning 1220-1222 West North Avenue

Dear President and City Council Members:

The Law Department has reviewed City Council Bill 20-0618 for form and legal sufficiency. The bill would change the zoning for the property known as 1220-1222 West North Avenue from the OR-1 zoning district to the C-1 zoning district.

The City Council may permit this rezoning 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. Code, Land Use, §10-304(b)(2); Baltimore City Code, Art. 32, §§5-508(a) and (b)(1).

In determining whether to rezone on the basis of mistake, the City Council is required to make findings of fact, for each property, on the following matters:

- (1) population change;
- (2) the availability of public facilities;
- (3) the present and future transportation patterns;
- (4) compatibility with existing and proposed development;
- (5) the recommendations of the Planning Commission and the Board of Municipal and Zoning Appeals; and
- (6) the relationship of the proposed amendment to the City's plan.

Md. Land Use Code Ann., §10-304(b)(1); *see also*, Baltimore City Code, Art. 32, §5-508(b)(2) (citing same factors with (v) being "the recommendations of the City agencies and

officials,” and (vi) 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.” *Cty. 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.’”).

With regard to rezoning on the basis of mistake, it is “firmly established that there is a strong presumption of the correctness of original zoning and of comprehensive rezoning.” *People’s Counsel v. Beachwood I Ltd. Partnership*, 107 Md. App. 627, 641 (1995) (*quoting Wells v. Pierpont*, 253 Md. 554, 557 (1969)). To sustain a piecemeal change, there must be substantial evidence that “the Council failed to take into account then existing facts . . . so that the Council’s action was premised . . . on a misapprehension.” *White*, 109 Md. App. at 698 (citation omitted). In other words, “[a] conclusion based upon a factual predicate that is incomplete or inaccurate may be deemed in zoning law, a mistake or error; an allegedly aberrant conclusion based on full and accurate information, by contrast, is simply a case of bad judgment, which is immunized from second-guessing.” *Id.* “Error can be established by showing that at the time of the comprehensive zoning the Council failed to take into account then existing facts, or projects or trends which were reasonably foreseeable of fruition in the future, so that the Council’s action was premised initially on a misapprehension[,]” [and] “by showing that events occurring subsequent to the comprehensive zoning have proven that the Council’s initial premises were incorrect.” *Boyce v. Sembly*, 25 Md. App. 43, 51 (1975) (citations omitted). “Thus, unless there is probative evidence to show that there were then existing facts which the Council, in fact, failed to take into account, or subsequently occurring events which the Council could not have taken into account, the

presumption of validity accorded to comprehensive zoning is not overcome and the question of error is not ‘fairly debatable.’” *Id.* at 52.

A finding of mistake, however, absent a regulatory taking, merely permits the further consideration of rezoning, it does not mandate a rezoning. *White*, 109 Md. App. at 708. Rather, a second inquiry “regarding whether, and if so, how, the property is reclassified,” is required. *Id.* at 709. This second conclusion is due great deference. *Id.* (after a prior mistake has been established and accepted as fact by a legislative zoning entity, that entity’s decision as to whether to rezone, and if so, how to reclassify, is due the same deference the prior comprehensive rezoning was due).

In sum, the Land Use and Transportation Committee (the “Committee”) is required to hold a quasi-judicial public hearing with regard to the bill wherein 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 Committee is required to make findings of fact for each property with regard to the factors in §§10-304 and 10-305 of the Land Use Article and § 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.

Here, the Planning Department Staff Report contains NO facts to support the finding of a mistake or substantial change in the neighborhood. Report, p. 3 (“...it cannot be established that the current zoning designation of OR-1/RM-U was a mistake, nor can it be established that substantial change has taken place in the neighborhood since the time of the last comprehensive rezoning.” Instead, the staff report supports a finding that this rezoning would be for the private gain of an individual property owner and not for the public good. Report, p. 2 (finding that the property is an alcohol outlet existing as a nonconforming use (not subject to the forced amortization due to its OR-1/RM-U zoning) which seeks to change to C-1 zoning because “The applicant’s attorney ...contends that the C-1 zoning is needed now in order for the liquor sales as is currently operating to continue” (contrary to the staff finding that the property would only need a change in zoning if it changed its liquor license to a different type). The staff report finds that rezoning to C-1 is not in the public’s interest. Report, p. 3.

This could amount to spot zoning.

The law with respect to spot zoning is well settled. In *Tennison v. Shomette*, 38 Md. App. 1, 8 (1977), the Court of Special Appeals explained that spot zoning occurs when a small area in a district is placed in a zoning classification which is different from the surrounding properties. The *Tennison* court reasoned that generally "spot zoning is not invalid per se", but that "its validity depends on the facts of each individual case."

It has also long been held by the courts that although spot zoning is illegal if inconsistent with an established comprehensive plan and is made solely for the "benefit of private interests", it can also be a valid exercise of the police power where the zoning is in harmony with the

comprehensive plan and bears a substantial relationship to the public health, safety, and general welfare. *Cassell v. Mayor of Baltimore*, 195 Md. 348 (1950). (Emphasis added.)

In this case, the facts in the staff report suggest that zoning to C-1 is impermissible spot zoning for private gain. Therefore, for the bill to be legally sufficient, there must be testimony adopted establishing that the rezoning to C-1 is for the public good and in accordance with the comprehensive plan. Facts must also be adopted to satisfy all of the above-referenced criteria, including a finding of mistake.

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 property 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, 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, since there are no facts in the staff report to support any of the required findings**, and that all procedural requirements are satisfied, the Law Department could approve the bill for form and legal sufficiency.

Very truly yours,



Ashlea Brown
Assistant Solicitor

cc: Dana P. Moore, Acting City Solicitor
Matthew Stegman, Mayor’s Office of Government Relations
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