

Redevelopment limits are on the table

Neighborhoods zoned R4, containing mostly rowhouses, could face some restrictions

BY MARK JENKINS

Redevelopment is racing through many of Washington's older neighborhoods, only some of which are in historic districts. The Office of Planning and the Historic Preservation Office recently proposed strategies to guide the building boom, while stopping short of historic-district controls.

The ideas are to place new limits on neighborhoods zoned R4, which contain mostly rowhouses, and to create "conservation districts" with some oversight of architectural style. Both were received positively at a town hall meeting sponsored by Advisory Neighborhood commissions 1A and 1B on Aug. 4, but the conservation-district idea was subsequently put on hold.

"We are not moving forward with that immediately," said Tanya Stern, chief of staff for the Office of Planning, which includes the Historic Preservation Office. "Maybe once the next administration takes office."

"I think there would be strong support for both from the commission," said Kent Boese, chairman of ANC 1A, which covers northern Columbia Heights, northern Pleasant Plains and his neighborhood, Park View. Bordered roughly by 16th Street NW to the west and McMillan Reservoir to the east, ANC 1A sits directly north of ANC 1B.

Under the active proposal, the matter-of-right height for buildings in R4 zones would be reduced from 40 to 35 feet, and individual houses could not necessarily be converted to multi-unit apartment structures. Building taller and denser would still be possible but would require a variance. The proposed changes will be considered at a Jan. 15 Zoning Commission hearing.

"The ANC hasn't taken a formal position yet," said ANC 1B Chairman James Turner, who lives in Columbia Heights. "But the consensus I'm hearing is that people are generally in support of the R4 proposal."

The proposed amendment "returns to the original intent of R4," he said. "R4 was designed to be a two-unit structure. In most cases, it's a townhouse and a basement unit or, back in the 1900s, when mine was built, a nanny unit. But a lot of people are doing, as a matter of right, very large structures, where you can go up to four units."

Because of skepticism about the conservation-district idea, it was excluded from a second joint ANC meeting Sept. 27, Turner said. "Whenever you say 'historic,' people get really excited. 'Oh, I'm never going to be able to replace my windows!'



MARK JENKINS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Kent Boese, chairman of Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1A, in front of a pop-up on Kenyon Street NW. Proposed changes will be considered at a Jan. 15 hearing.

But that isn't what is being proposed here."

Only a few blocks of Boese's ANC are in a historic district, Meridian Hill, he said, so most of the commission's territory could benefit from the tabled proposal.

"In a conservation district, a large construction project — whether it be a third-floor addition or a rear-of-house addition — would go through the review process to look at the design and see that it's compatible with the architectural style. But conservation districts would not review windows and small things. So I think that provides a lot of flexibility."

Both the zoning change and conservation districts would give neighbors some say over one of the most-discussed phenomena in center-city neighborhoods: pop-ups, which add one or sometimes multiple stories to existing houses.

When D.C. rowhouses are significantly enlarged, Boese noted, it's usually not by people who live there. "If this was a matter of homeowners increasing the footprint of their own households because they have a

growing family, there would probably be a lot more care and attention to what the end result was. A lot of what's going on is by flippers who come in. If you're lucky, they save the facade."

The redone house or multi-unit building is often shoddy, he said. "When somebody spends \$800,000 or more on a new house, or \$600,000 on what could be considered half of a house, I don't think you should expect to put another \$100,000 or \$200,000 into the house once you discover problems that weren't fixed."

The potential zoning and preservation changes, Boese noted, "would not prevent you from putting a pop-up on your building. It would give you some guidance on what that third-floor addition should look like."

"If you're a row where the seven houses were all built to coordinate with each other, if one house gets a pop-up, and then over time the other six, it would be nice if it kept that rhythm again, rather than having seven different styles."

districtlocaliving@washpost.com