

REGISTERED COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

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DEMOCRACY AND DESIGN AT THE MOST LOCAL LEVEL

Today the City Council Rules Committee has the chance to reaffirm one of the best parts of the new zoning code – the creation of Registered Community Organizations (RCOs), groups that give citizen a real seat at the table in the development process and with that a bigger opportunity to improve the design of buildings in their neighborhoods.

Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell has introduced a bill that would amend the code in order to give her constituents more say about what is built in their neighborhoods. It is well-intentioned, but it would very likely have the opposite effect by gutting the new RCOs.

The bill would consolidate even more power over development decisions in the hands of the district City Council members, at the expense of the fine-grained local democracy that comes from neighbors sitting down together to advocate for good design in their neighborhoods. Those neighbors can work with developers on the actual design of buildings, ideally removed from political considerations.

Specifically, the bill would:

- Require individual notification of neighbors, which would exhaust volunteer citizens and deter developers.
- the District Council member will get to pick and choose among RCOs and decide whether they should meet together or whether multiple meetings would be held.
- Modify the requirements for registering as an RCO so that closed, non-inclusive groups would be recognized equally with open, inclusive groups.

- Make the new Civic Design Review (CDR) Committee unworkable by having the District Council member appoint as many local representatives as she or he wishes.

These changes will heavily politicize the process of design review envisioned in the new zoning code. It will take power from the people most affected by new projects and place it back in the hands of the district Council persons, as it was in the past. Many people think that this would reincarnate the worst aspects of the old zoning and development process.

In some parts of the city, civic groups have been organized for decades. They know how to work within the system to get their viewpoints heard, and they may have a few lawyers living in the neighborhood to help out.

Too often, this is not the case in economically depressed neighborhoods. In those places, where people are holding down two jobs or working shifts, it is much harder to establish a core group of volunteers to keep tabs on zoning applications. But it's vital that these citizens have a say in development decisions, and that's where the creation of new RCOs comes in.

So what do a group of people need to do to be recognized as an RCO? Simply name a contact person, identify the geographic boundaries of the area they represent, say whether the contact wants to be notified by mail or email, and show evidence that meetings are open to the public and that leaders are elected by the members. Then renew each year so that contact information is up to date. RCOs must be inclusive and welcome participation from a diversity of neighbors.

And what does a group get once it is listed as an RCO? Any developer who has a project going before the Zoning Board of Adjustment or the new Civic Design Review committee is required to contact the group and set up a public meeting to hear its reaction to the proposed project. Both the RCO and the developer document the meeting, and both sets of minutes are sent to the ZBA and/or the CDR Committee, whose members are obliged to take the contents seriously. In addition, one representative of the local RCO sits on the CDR Committee as a voting member for each project in the neighborhood.

Nothing changes as far as who is allowed to speak at ZBA hearings. Everyone still has the right to be heard. The same holds true with the new CDR Committee. The creation of RCOs simply adds a new, strong and respected community voice.

In many neighborhoods there will be more than one RCO. And they may have different points of view. Such disagreements are inevitable. When that happens, the idea is that the groups will work out their differences among themselves and not do it in front of the developer.

Conflicts may still exist between the people living right next door to a project and those further away, and conflicts like that may not be easy to resolve. But making the effort will result in a big payoff. The RCOs can help focus attention on improving the design of projects—for example, minimizing shadows cast on neighbors, reducing traffic congestion, and providing public green space to offset the bulk of the building.

Zoning is one expression of how people live together in a city. The leaders of an RCO can help people focus on zoning issues, steering them away from old conflicts and toward the new opportunities to improve their neighborhoods through good design.

The more democracy we can have in our communities, the better able our elected officials will be to do their jobs. Registered Community Organizations can elevate design while furthering democratic ideals at the most local level. Let's give them a chance to succeed.