

# Chevy Chase DC Conservancy

April 4, 2024

Ms. Marnique Heath, Chair  
Historic Preservation Review Board  
1100 4th Street, SW, Suite 650 East  
Washington, DC 20024

Dear Chair Heath and Members of the Board,

In a March 27, 2024 statement to the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB), a local nonprofit, Historic Chevy Chase DC (HCCDC), explains its 9-3 board vote to oppose the proposed [Chevy Chase DC Historic District nomination](#) by sidestepping virtually all discussion and analysis of the merits of the document submitted to the HPRB by the Chevy Chase DC Conservancy on October 16, 2023. Instead, HCCDC spuriously claims the nomination would work against “creating a more diverse, vibrant, welcoming community.”

HCCDC bases its opposition to the nomination on a false premise, the superficiality of which it acknowledges, saying that historic designation “at this time would have the unfortunate effect of *appearing* to perpetuate the racial, ethnic, and religious exclusivity on the basis of which Chevy Chase was originally conceived and executed.” (Emphasis added.) HCCDC’s objections rest not on the present reality of the long-increasing demographic diversity existing in Chevy Chase DC – a trend HCCDC ignores – but the erroneous perception that a historic district will somehow reverse that progress.

The pronouncement that: “Until we have progress on...the inclusion of income-integrated housing...a more inclusive Chevy Chase is substantially more important than the addition of a 38th residential historic district” more properly belongs to a political organization than a historical society. It's a false dichotomy. Creating a historic district, affordable housing and a more inclusive Chevy Chase are *mutually reinforcing goals*.

Without evidence, HCCDC claims “opposition to the civic core redevelopment is at the heart of [the Conservancy’s] mobilization efforts” – a baseless charge since historic district designation will not stop re-development at the Chevy Chase Community Center and Library site. The two buildings are not Contributing Structures to the historic district and their dates of construction are outside the Period of Significance. Historic district designation will, however, provide “design review” for any new construction there and elsewhere along Connecticut Avenue and in the proposed area.

HCCDC mistakenly alleges that affordable housing and redevelopment would be “imperiled” by an historic district. Affordable housing decisions, as a matter of policy, are made by zoning

organizations, not preservation ones. Preservation doesn't regulate land use. Affordable housing and redevelopment can happen in Chevy Chase DC with or without a historic district.

HCCDC's charitable incorporation status – its reason for existing under a 501(c)(3) tax exemption – rests on its mission to promote the “history, design, architecture, landscape, streetscape, historic preservation and development of the Chevy Chase DC neighborhood.”

HCCDC betrays not only its organizational purpose, but also its members, donors, and board members, both past and present, who have supported and worked for a historic district over the course of the organization's 34-year history. The nine HCCDC board members who voted to oppose the nomination have turned their backs on HCCDC's own legacy and, most importantly, the interests of the neighborhood they purport to serve.

In sidestepping the nomination's merits, HCCDC characterizes the nomination as “seem[ingly] copied in large measure from the HCCDC 2008 proposal.” The 2008 nomination was an incomplete draft that was never submitted to the city. The Chevy Chase DC Conservancy hired an independent Architectural Historian, qualified under Section 36 CFR 61 of the National Historic Preservation Act, to re-write and complete the nomination for submission.

The 2023 Chevy Chase DC Historic District nomination provides greater, more detailed, and in-depth scholarship on the area's qualifications for historic designation status, as HCCDC board members acknowledged during a February HCCDC board meeting, when the Conservancy made a presentation. For example, HCCDC's important work rediscovering and acknowledging the history of African American displacement and exclusion in the neighborhood is documented in Section 8 of the 2023 nomination.

It is troubling HCCDC sees its mission as “proposing protection for worthy sites.” The elitism of this statement harkens back to the beginnings of the historic preservation movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the campaign to save George Washington's Mount Vernon. For the next 100 years, only sites connected with America's colonial past were considered “worthy” of preservation, and hundreds of Victorian-era buildings were demolished in the name of progress.

This idea of preferencing one type of historic architecture over another is part of what led to the creation of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and the establishment of the National Register, which recognizes more than 90,000 properties for their significance in a variety of disciplines. National Register criteria are designed to evaluate all historic buildings, sites, and districts equally and eliminate the argument that one period or style or type of building is somehow superior to another.

A Chevy Chase DC Historic District designation will provide a voice and a seat at the table for neighborhood residents and the Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC) when reviewing new construction, something many people deeply regret was not possible when the apartment building at 5333 Connecticut Avenue was initially proposed.

This empowerment is critical, because the city has proposed two new neighborhood mixed-use zones for our eight-block commercial corridor that emphasize matter-of-right development, if

approved by the DC Zoning Commission in late April. Without a historic district, residents and the ANC will be unable to weigh in on any new construction projects. Our voices will be silenced.

Protecting smaller, less expensive homes from demolition (but not alteration) is at the very heart of the historic district proposal. By opposing the nomination, HCCDC effectively signals it has no problem with the future demolition of homes and businesses for the benefit of builders, developers, and real estate conglomerates and corporations. The vast majority of new properties on the market are becoming increasingly expensive and out-of-reach financially for many who want to move to the neighborhood. Homes that previously sold for \$1 Million are now re-appearing for \$3 and \$4 Million after developers finish demolishing and expanding them. This makes Chevy Chase DC *more* exclusive, not less.

Stable, established, urban, pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods like ours are highly desirable to developers, because they don't have to build the infrastructure to support new homes. They can simply tie into it. This increases their profit margins. Because they keep coming back for more, we can no longer take for granted that what we appreciate and enjoy about Chevy Chase DC today, will remain for us tomorrow, unless we act to protect it now.

Respectfully submitted,

**The Chevy Chase DC Conservancy**

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