

Item 6 - Correspondence

Concerned Resident,
Leesborough Community,
Silver Spring, MD, 20902

February 1 2023

Dear Montgomery Planning Board,

THE UNACCEPTABLE STATE OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT IN WHEATON'S BUSINESS DISTRICT

I am writing in my capacity as a 10 year resident in the Leesborough Community area in Wheaton. I am a health professional by training, a business woman and a vicarious urban designer, by way of global travels.

I am writing to you both in your Supervisory and Chief planning positions, because I have noticed that Wheaton is struggling to develop. Though there are high net worth residents like myself who enjoy the parks and recreational quality of life, the businesses do not cater to our lifestyle needs. There is a dearth of vibrant lifestyle stores as one has in Bethesda and Chevy Chase, such as organic groceries, yoga studios, small boutiques etc. In Wheaton, the majority of businesses are hispanic owned and cater more to the lower-income Hispanic communities. As a result, I resort to driving into Chevy Chase and Bethesda to reap the benefits of the smaller businesses there that cater to my needs. I prefer to live in Wheaton than Bethesda because of its access to parks and nature, and would love to see more diverse businesses, in aesthetically pleasing buildings, and with improved walkability.

As an African woman, I embrace cultural diversity. However, I refute equating cultural diversity to shanty ugly buildings and "ghetto" like structures. The Wheaton business district on Georgia avenue is filled with "pollo" stores , adult shops, liquor stores in very ugly, antiquated buildings. This is not cultural diversity, rather it is neglect and as a result of squalor and disorderliness being accepted as the emblem of immigrant culture from less economically developed countries.

My business partner and I recently went browsing in the area to find a suitable branch location for our authentic french bakery, that is french owned. We have locations in Georgetown, Bethesda, and Alexandria, and we were put off by the high car traffic in such a dense area and noted there was a surplus of spanish speaking shops over any other ethnicity.

As I mentioned, the residents in the townhomes in Wheaton are mostly middle – high income Caucasian, African American, and African, and we want the values of our homes to increase. We would like a walkable business area with truly diverse businesses in nice buildings, with more height. Thus, it is not in the interest of these diverse residents to have

both the urban designer for the business district, Luis Estrada, as well as the Regional director for Wheaton, Luisa Cardona to be latinos and only cater to the interests of the Latino populace. Even the banks that used to have diverse staff became Latino only.

With regards to Luis Estrada's insistence that the residents of Wheaton would like the core to consist of small businesses only, this is not necessarily true, especially if a mix would improve our quality of life. For example, we higher income residents would not mind a whole foods or a known co-op for organic foods. Currently, it is easier to buy alcohol than fresh organic produce in Wheaton. What matters most to us is that the buildings need to be revitalized to have a charming, quaint appeal for both small businesses and larger brands that cater to the needs of *all* the diverse residents.

In summary, it is concerning that the development of Wheaton is restricted to latino predominant "shanty towns" and squalor under the guise of "preserving cultural heritage." In order to truly showcase the diverse richness of Wheaton, we need to revive the aesthetic quality of the buildings to attract a diverse array of high quality businesses. We also need to ensure access to loans are truly diverse and not skewed to one ethnicity only, via "colonization" of business banking by one ethnicity in the area.

About me: I am a successful businesswoman with enterprises in the art+lifestyle and hospitality industries. My initial foray into urban design was at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, where I performed a 6 week intensive in urban design and planning. I elected to pursue this program after my bachelor's in Public Health from UNC because I understood the importance of the built environment on health. I have lived extensively in multiple well planned cities in Europe, Vienna included and I have a master's degree in International Development from the London School of Economics. Suffice to say, I have high quality lived experience in matters of urban planning and design.

Though I could easily move to the Potomac etc, I am eager to be more actively involved in urban planning and design and revitalization of Wheaton and see it built up. I feel called to it, rather than abandoning the responsibility to someone else. I am already testifying in the Thursday meeting on this matter. Please let me know how I can become more involved **meaningfully** to change the development trajectory of Wheaton for the better, and ensure it caters to the needs of *all* its ethnic residents.

Sincerely,

Ms Nwosu

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