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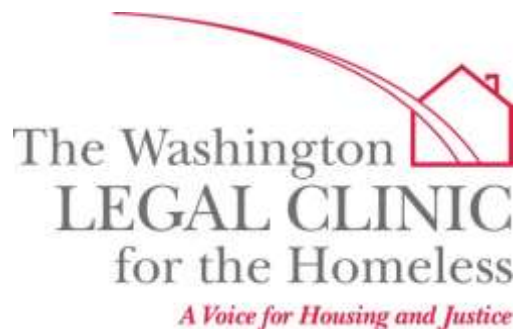
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Testimony before the DC Council Committee on Business and Economic Development and Committee on Transportation and the Environment

Joint Public Roundtable on
PR22-0359 – “Franklin School Surplus Declaration and Approval Resolution of 2017”;
PR22-0360 – “Franklin School Disposition Approval Resolution of 2017”;
PR22-0411 – “Grimke School Surplus Declaration and Approval Resolution of 2017”;
and
PR22-0412 – “Grimke School Disposition Approval Resolution of 2017”

Presented by Caitlin Cocilova
September 20, 2017

Good afternoon Councilmembers Cheh and McDuffie and members of the respective Committees. My name is Caitlin Cocilova, and I am a staff attorney at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. The Legal Clinic envisions – and since 1987 has worked towards – a just and inclusive community for all residents of the District of Columbia, where housing is a human right and where every individual and family has equal access to the resources they need to thrive. My testimony today will focus on the need for D.C. to stop giving away public land, paving the way for private companies to retain and redevelop valuable spaces throughout our rapidly gentrifying city. Accordingly, we oppose the surplus of both the Franklin School and the Grimke School.

As you know, in order to surplus property, the property must be deemed “no longer required for public purposes.” This statement and designation doesn’t add up.

First, as is well known in D.C., D.C. has a very real affordable housing crisis. This affordable housing crisis did not occur naturally. This crisis – which in turn has contributed to a large increase in homelessness in the District over the past decade, particularly among families – was the result of decisions and deals being made with developers, many of whom have political connections and who continue to reap the benefits of those connections by cashing in on campaigns and purposefully creating a different D.C., a D.C. that is a lot less Black and with a lot less people who are working class or low income. By continuing to allow developers to call the shots, rather than keeping public land public, this cycle is likely to continue repeating.



Second, and more specifically related to the surplus of Franklin School, it is a complete affront to people struggling with housing instability and homelessness to state that the District cannot come up with any other way to use the public property other than to dispose of it and throw it away to developers. D.C. let the Franklin School sit vacant for almost ten years, shamelessly teasing former and potential homeless residents staying in Franklin Park across the street. There has been a pattern of the forced decentralization of people experiencing homelessness from the downtown area: Franklin shelter closed in 2008; Capitol City Crossing broke ground in 2015 right across from CCNV, which has put even more pressure on the shelter and forced the migration of people from the small parks that used to be open to the public in that area; and the MLK, Jr. Library is undergoing extensive construction, resulting in people experiencing homelessness being shuttled out of the downtown area to other programs. Relatedly, the Human Services Committee is currently in the process of marking up a bill amending the Homeless Services Reform Act that includes changes to tighten the doors to services for people facing housing crises. One of the stated reasons for those changes is that there are limited resources to serve the pool of those in need and the fact that the homeless services system should not and cannot make up for the lack of affordable housing in the District. Though the argument could be made that surplussing land will create tax revenues to ultimately drive up the amount of money D.C. earns to spend on assisting people in need, it is clear that D.C.'s priorities lie elsewhere, such as in tax cuts and duplicative transportation efforts, as evidenced by this past year's budget allocations.

The decision to surplus and dispose of public land – such as the Franklin School, the Grimke School, and the property surrounding the Crummell School – is a deliberate reduction and giving away of a finite resource that should belong to the people – and which technically currently does. By disposing of land, you're disposing of people and of any true community control over properties. By disposing of land, you're saying to current and future community members that you believe an inequitable free market should decide for them what they should like and want, as long as they can afford it and are accepted into those spaces. You're saying that private entities should be allowed to dictate what "public" means in practice – the private owners set the hours of their businesses, can require people purchase or at least register for memberships to enter their programs, and determine what can and cannot be brought into those public spaces.

It's no secret that the city is changing rapidly. Though the government may think it has control over its land use decisions now – as it is currently making the choice to give up its properties – it is decreasing its control and ability to effectively serve its residents with every parcel it disposes. Less land means less long-term leverage, which means less sustainable mechanisms with which to support the needs of its residents. In our current climate that strongly favors the interests of developers over the needs of low-income, working class, predominately Black communities, community members know the free market doesn't work for them; the only way to halt any further damage with regards to land use is by maintaining it under government ownership.