

SAVANNAH

DOWNTOWN
NEIGHBORHOOD
ASSOCIATION



June 21, 2017

Letter to the Editor of the Savannah Morning News:

The Downtown Neighborhood Association of Savannah(DNA) is dismayed to observe the outrage expressed by various business community representatives regarding the procedural activities associated with efforts by the City of Savannah to address the proliferation of hotels in the Landmark District. We are profoundly disappointed in the mean-spirited and personal rhetoric expressed by some, seemingly endorsed by the *Savannah Morning News* (21 June 2017 Editorial), as it makes much-needed future cooperation between the city and its business community more difficult. Ironically however, this unfortunate dustup may offer us all - business interests, government, and residents – an opportunity to collectively address and repair what is often a flawed process.

Suffice it to say that in this particular case, DNA representatives and residents were aware of and involved, not because of insider connections, but because the process was sufficiently transparent that we could follow it. We reached out to MPC staff and asked for a meeting to review residential incentives. Too often, that is not the situation and the shoe is firmly on the other foot, strongly favoring development interests. Most often, residents are subject to a litany of last minute surprises on many important, large-scale projects that have quietly been in the works for weeks and months, involving private negotiations between MPC staff and developers and their representatives, with the public completely in the dark. The often complex result is then sprung on an unsuspecting and shut-out citizenry, often with well under a week's notice before a major project – sometimes replete with variance, zoning change, and/or zoning text amendment requests - is brought forward for government approval at a public hearing. The public is then forced, with little time to do so, to scramble to catch up, assess and understand the proposal, construct a position, prepare paperwork, mobilize stakeholders, develop presentations, etc. It's not nearly enough time to conduct required due-

diligence and develop a well-thought out, evidenced based position to support DNA's mission to protect the residents' quality- of-life and the fragile historic character of this beautiful and unique city, which is of great benefit to our business community. We understand and respect the requirement for private petitioners to protect proprietary matters for competitive advantage, but that must never come at the expense of the public interest. The existing project approval process as is almost always flawed, almost always at the expense of residents of Savannah as outlined above.

Here is a simple proposed solution. We believe the public should be afforded a minimum three weeks official notice of any Savannah project and/or zoning amendment request scheduled to be heard by the appropriate governmental authority with jurisdiction. Such notice should include the exact detail and supporting documentation that will come before the adjudicating authority. Practically, that means that within three weeks of a proposed hearing date, petitioner would no longer be allowed to amend the submission in any way – short of withdrawing it or requesting a postponement. Said submission would be published as legally required, being made available to the general public for review and comment three weeks before any scheduled hearing. This procedure would not delay proposed projects – it would merely require petitioner to finish the paperwork sooner and the government to officially promulgate it. Everybody wins and it should help prevent future finger-pointing fiascos such as this one that serve to benefit no one.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Melinda D. Allen". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Melinda D. Allen

President, Downtown Neighborhood Association of Savannah, GA Inc.