

Armed Forces Retirement Home settles its zoning dispute with D.C., allowing massive redevelopment to advance

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The redevelopment of the massive Armed Forces Retirement Home campus in Northwest D.C. finally looks ready to move ahead, now that the agency has resolved a dispute with District officials over the entitlement process for the site.

The AFRH announced Wednesday it has signed a memorandum of understanding with D.C.'s Office of Planning and the National Capital Planning Commission, a move that should open the door for a 4.3 million-square-foot project on an 80-acre section of the campus.

The agency picked a team of Madison Marquette and Urban Atlantic to manage the project last fall, in what could someday become one of the largest developments in the whole city, located at the intersection of Irving Street NW and North Capitol Street. But those plans haven't advanced much since then, as the AFRH and the District have sparred over a key question: should the feds or the city have the final say on zoning at the property?

The AFRH has hoped for years now to pursue a federal entitlement process, giving the NCPC full control over the project and avoiding the legal challenges that have dogged so many other large developments that move through the city's process.



ARMED FORCES RETIREMENT HOME

That's sparked repeated condemnations from D.C. leaders, who most recently dubbed such a decision "foolhardy."

But the agency has backed off that stance in signing this new MOU, agreeing to a hybrid process of sorts. The NCPC will still get to review the master plan for the 272-acre campus, but D.C. planners will get the chance to propose specific zoning standards for the private development, and the D.C. Zoning Commission will review them.

"This is really clarifying that we will be a partner with them, not an antagonist to them," D.C. Planning Director Andrew Trueblood said in an interview. "There will be federal action and there will be zoning, and one won't try to contradict or overlap the other. It's preserving everyone's authority, making sure we all respect each other's roles."

That's excellent news for Trueblood and the rest of Mayor Muriel Bowser's administration, who have long hoped to see as much housing as possible on the site to meet the city's ambitious goals around new construction. Trueblood suggested the site could someday hold as many as 3,000 new units (though the exact mix with other commercial uses will depend on other large projects nearby, like the much-maligned McMillan Sand Filtration Site redevelopment).

"A big part of that will be affordable, and this is an important area for affordable housing," Trueblood said, referencing Bowser's efforts to build more housing in areas of the city that haven't seen much new construction. "And with so many anchor institutions nearby, from Catholic University to the hospitals, there is a real opportunity here."

But the road to get there will be anything but simple. First, the NCPC, a body of federal and local planners, will get the chance to scrutinize some changes to the property's master plan to account for the development team's proposal. The AFRH hopes to get that process started this fall.

Simultaneously, Trueblood hopes to finish the process of revising the city's chief land use document, the Comprehensive Plan. In particular, it would be helpful to have changes laying out standards for development around the city set in stone before advancing the AFRH project, Trueblood said. He's often hoped to finish

those revisions before the end of the year, but the pandemic has complicated those efforts.

But whenever that gets done, Urban Atlantic and Madison Marquette will be able to submit a proposal to the Office of Planning. Then, the agency will craft an amendment to the city's zoning map to match that proposal, submitting that document to the Zoning Commission.

Trueblood hopes that process removes many of the chances for appeals and additional delays for the project, as he notes that "uncertainty" over local opposition to the proposal is what so frustrated the AFRH in early discussions about entitlement.

However, there's no telling just how long all this will take. The AFRH is hoping to have it all wrapped up sometime next year, but time is of the essence for the agency, as the AFRH is largely self-funded and it has long counted on an infusion of cash from a land deal to maintain its facilities for veterans. The agency still operates some space elsewhere on its D.C. campus, in addition to another facility in Mississippi.

Yet after many years of stops and starts on the effort, all involved are anxious to see any progress, no matter how halting.

"Madison Marquette and Urban Atlantic are delighted that AFRH has reached a definitive understanding with the National Capital Planning Commission and the District of Columbia Office of Planning," executives with the development team wrote in a statement. "We look forward to bringing to fruition with AFRH, NCPC and the District of Columbia this long-anticipated and community-enhancing project."

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