

Ward 5 Redistricting: A Map that Puts the Needs of Residents and Neighborhoods First
by
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Overview

The final results of the Ward 5 Redistricting Task Force, approved in a vote on Thursday, October 6th, do not meet the stated goals of creating Advisory Neighborhood Commissions that encourage neighborhood cohesiveness, utilize natural boundaries, and group neighborhoods together based on common interest. We believe that a better solution to the redistricting process is available, and we would like to present that here.

The solution presented at the October 6th meeting was disappointing. As members of the Ward 5 Task Force, we felt that two months worth of time, effort, and energy had seemingly been tossed aside in favor of a plan quickly put together by the Task Force's Executive Committee with minimal input from the Task Force as a whole. It was difficult to believe that our opinions and input had been truly valued, when, in the end, the proposed commission lines did not resemble the work that Task Force members had spent time creating since early August.

Because we are not sure when the Task Force will meet again and in an effort to promote public discussion, we have chosen to communicate directly with Ward 5 residents and the people of the District of Columbia about the redistricting process, the current political landscape in Ward 5 as we started redistricting, the weaknesses of Executive Committee's proposed plan, and the virtues of what we believe is a rational and superior alternative.

The Purpose of Redistricting

Two key elements are at the heart of any redistricting effort. The first is to ensure that an individual's vote carries as much weight in the political process as every other vote. Here's a simple example: If you live in a district with 3,000 people and a Ward 5 friend lives a district of 1,000 people, your vote carries one-third of the weight of your friend's vote. That is, you'd have to vote three times to have the same impact in an election as your friend does just voting once. So redistricting is about upholding the concept of equal voting: "one person, one vote."

The District Home Rule Charter takes this voting concern into account. The Charter states that each single member district (SMD) for Advisory Neighborhood Commissioners should contain "approximately 2,000" people. *Approximately* recognizes that, although having each district contain 2,000 people may be the ideal in terms of equality, the numbers are not the only criteria that a redistricting plan should consider.

The second reason we draw lines is to create political entities (in the Ward 5 case, single member districts and advisory neighborhood commissions) that promote neighborhood cohesiveness, natural boundaries and barriers, groupings of neighborhoods that have commonalities and would be able to communicate easily with one another, etc.

So that's why redistrict: to equalize voting power among residents as reasonably as possible and creating groupings of people and neighborhoods that make sense.

The Ward 5 Political Landscape Going into Redistricting

Those two basic reasons are why Ward 5 could not simply say, "let's just leave everything as we've had it for the last decade." Let's take a closer look.

Regarding equal voting power, population growth and shifts had led to a significant disparity between the smallest and largest single member districts in Ward 5. The range, from 1,700 to 2,700 people, meant real adjustments had to be made.

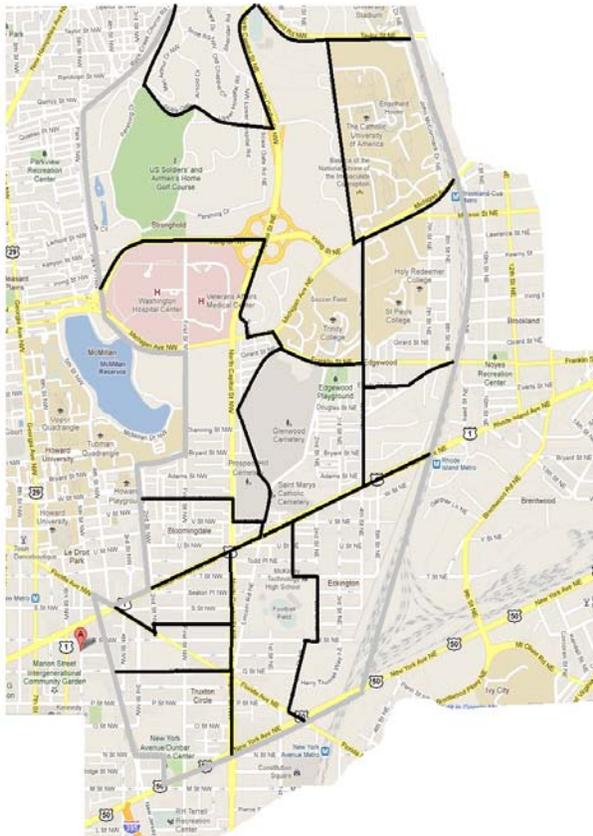
Regarding the secondary criteria, Ward 5 currently has commissions that have proven to be unwieldy and that don't connect related neighborhoods. These facts do not in any way criticize the efforts of individual commissioners or individual commissions to serve their residents to the best of their ability. It just recognizes the difficulty that can arise when political lines are drawn that don't adhere to the criteria discussed above. Two examples follow.

First, current SMD 5C02 is split roughly in half with about 50% of its residents living in the Northeast neighborhood of Eckington south of McKinley Tech High School, and about 50% of residents in the Hanover-Bates neighborhood south of P Street in Northwest. The residents of these two parts of the same single member district are separated from each other by significant geographical barriers (Florida Avenue, North Capitol Street, and large parking lots) and often have different issues of concern.

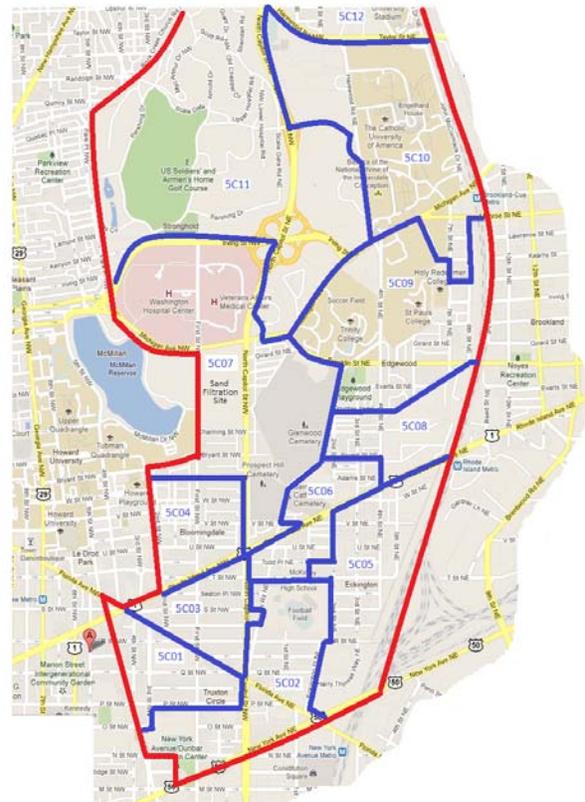
Second, ANC 5C is a long, narrow commission that runs from Hawaii Avenue at its northernmost point to New York Avenue on its southern border. At the north end is the Pleasant Hills neighborhood; at the south end is Hanover-Bates. Both are great neighborhoods, but they sit about three miles apart, with residents from the one having very little or no idea about the issues and concerns of the other. Redrawing commission lines was supposed to address problems such as this, but the process fell short.

The Task Force, consisting of about 40 people, did its job quite well. People from all over the ward worked well together and, by September 21st, hammered out a proposed set of single member districts. For example, here are the proposed single member districts for western Ward 5 as of September 21st.

Proposed SMDs as of 9-21-11



Current SMDs



The next step in the redistricting process was to combine those single member districts into commissions. At the meeting on the 21st, Task Force Chair Ayawna Webster announced that the Executive Committee would draw up options for commissions. That part of the process was proposed because the deadline was looming for completion of the task force's work. Discussion proceeded about how the commissions should be created. In an effort to create a clear charge for how the Executive Committee should draw up commissions, Task Force member John Salatti made the following motion:

I move that the [Executive Committee] draw ANC boundaries without a primary concern being having an equal number of single member districts within them but rather the Executive Committee should create ANC that maintain neighborhood cohesiveness, respect natural boundaries and barriers, and combine neighborhoods that have common characteristics and interests.

The Task Force left that meeting thinking that the Executive Committee would come back with options that upheld neighborhood cohesiveness, accounted for natural boundaries and barriers, and created groups of single member districts that had similarities in makeup and often face similar issues. Unfortunately, that's not what happened.

The Weaknesses of Executive Committee's¹ Plan

The Executive Committee's proposed redistricting map has fundamental weaknesses that make it not in the best interest of all the residents and neighborhoods of Ward 5. What went wrong? The problems can be grouped into two categories: the "poors" and the violations.

The "Poors" can be summed up as such: poor info, poor notice, poor follow-up, and poor explanations. The most egregious of the poors is the poor information that the Executive Committee released. Not before the October 6th meeting when the options for commissions were presented and not at that meeting did the Executive Committee present the Task Force, let alone the wider Ward 5 community, a single clear map or adequate set of descriptions of what commissions they were proposing. And since then, the only graphic information that has been made publicly available has been through the single efforts of Task Force member Geoff Hatchard, who published a series of maps last week on Greater Greater Washington (<http://greatergreaterwashington.org/post/12339/ward-5-task-force-chooses-more-ancs/>).

As for the other poors,

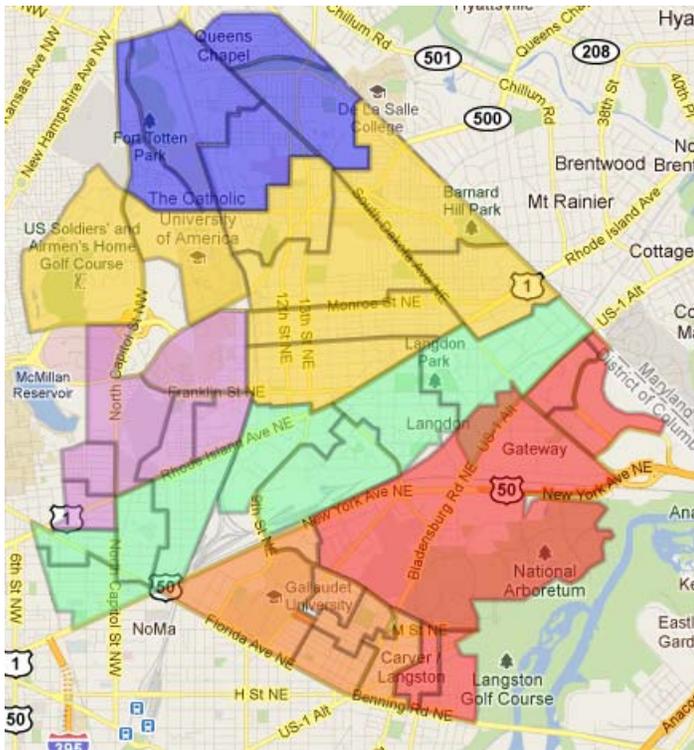
- (1) Poor notice: Task Force members did not receive adequate notice for many meetings the Task Force held during the last three months. Indeed, the last meeting changed dates four times in the course of a week with some changes happening within hours of the scheduled meeting time. At that last meeting, it was announced that these changes were done to accommodate Chair Ayawna Webster, due to the illness of her mother. Although any illness is unfortunate, any organization with three co-chairs should have been able to handle this situation in consideration of the 40 members of the Task Force with minimal disruption. The irony of these constantly changing meeting notices is that even with an extra week at their disposal, the Executive Committee was still unable to come to the meeting with a clear map and accurately written descriptions of proposed SMDs and ANCs for members and residents attending the meeting.
- (2) Poor follow-up: One would have thought that if one comes to a meeting unprepared, the least that could be done would be to follow up with good information. In the case of the Executive Committee, such lack of follow-up has been true throughout the redistricting process, and has continued since the October 6th: the Executive Committee has failed to follow up and give the Task Force good information based on the work that went on in the meetings.
- (3) Poor explanations: A critical aspect of "poor" follow-up and during the October 6th meeting has been poor explanations. For all its violations of the tenets of redistricting, at no point has the Executive Committee offered the Task Force or ward residents any good explanations for why it did what it did.

¹ (consisting of Chair Ayawna Webster, Chief of Staff for Councilmember Harry Thomas; Co-Chairs Anita Bonds, Chair of the State Democratic Party, and Anthony Hood, Chair of the District's Zoning Commission; Parliamentarian John Washington; Sergeant-at-Arms Bob King, ANC Commissioner from Ft. Lincoln; and Recording Secretary Michael Henderson)

That lack of explanation as well as all the other “poors” make the work of the Executive Committee appear sloppy and arbitrary.

The Violations. All the “poors” alone have made the Task Force’s work much harder and more frustrating than it should have been, but what has left many Task Force members shaking their heads in disbelief is that the maps presented to and pushed through at the Task Force’s last meeting violated the basic definitions of why we redistrict and violated every criteria of the charge from the Task Force.

As we noted above, redistricting focuses on two criteria: equalizing the voting power of all residents and creating groupings of people and neighborhoods that make sense. Therefore, what should have happened after three months’ worth of meetings was a narrowing of the disparity between the smallest and largest districts and more rational commissions. The Executive Committee’s plan violated both concepts.



The population spread between the largest and smallest of current Ward 5 SMDs is less than 800 people. But after the redistricting efforts of the Executive Committee, that gap has actually widened to about 850 people. The smallest proposed single member district, which would be in Fort Lincoln, would consist of 1,265 people.

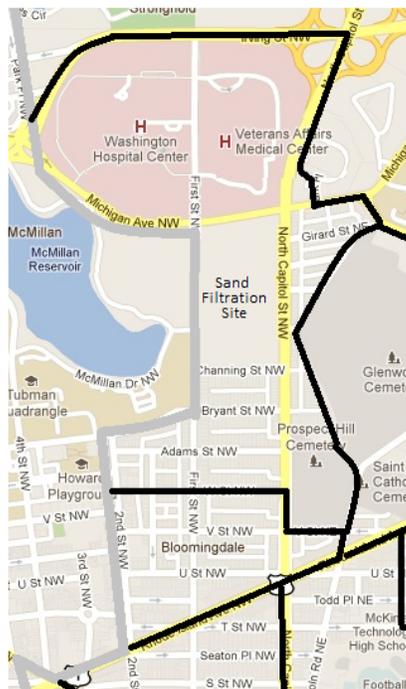
One of the more egregious changes occurred in the Bloomingdale neighborhood. In the area of north of Rhode Island Avenue flanking North Capitol Street, consisting of the Bloomingdale and Stronghold neighborhoods, current districts 5C04 and 5C07 contain 2,467 and 1,939 residents, respectively. See map #1 below.

Map #1 – Current districts

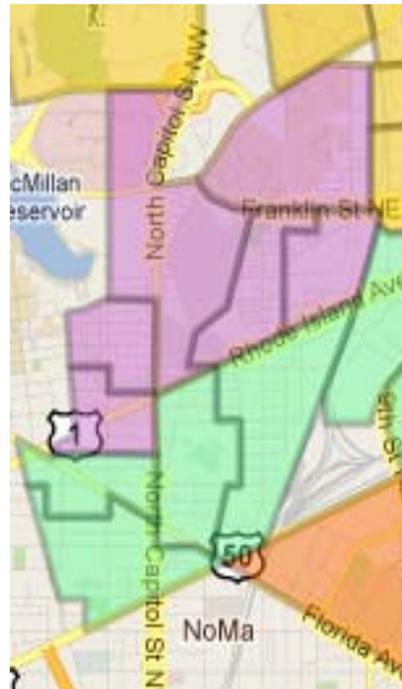


At the September 21st meeting, those districts were reshaped slightly to account for population changes. The changed districts would contain 1,987 and 1,984 people, respectively. The changes reduced the disparity in the number of residents and brought the districts quite close to the 2,000 resident ideal. See map #2 below.

Map #2 -- September 21st proposal



Map #3 – Executive Committee proposal



This looks all good, right? Apparently not, because in the Executive Committee’s proposed plan from October 6th, the previous efforts were abandoned and replaced with this. See Map #3 above right.

Two districts with nearly equal populations were replaced by three with populations of (from south to north) of 2,061, 2,039, and 1,399, respectively. Although the first two districts are roughly proportional, the third is significantly smaller and far below the 2,000 resident ideal, indeed falling approximately 33% short. The Executive Committee has yet to offer any explanation for departing from the September 21st map or any justification for why this is a superior plan. Whatever motivated this new arrangement, we do know that this proposal violates most of the tenets of redistricting.

The Executive Committee's effort also violated the principle that commissions should consist of single member districts that belong together because they share common characteristics and issues. One of the new commissions is over 3.3 miles long from end to end, stretching from the boundary with Ward 1 all the way to the Maryland border. If approved, this commission likely would be the longest commission in the entire city. Current ANC 5C is less than 2.8 miles long, so one of the problems that this redistricting process was meant to resolve has potentially been made more egregious. Not only that, the neighborhoods at either end of this proposed commission—Woodridge and Hanover-Bates—are as different a pair of neighborhoods as you could put together in Ward 5. Woodridge consists of detached, single family homes with more in common with their Mt. Rainier, Maryland neighbors than with the dense, row house, central-city neighborhood of Hanover-Bates.

When you compare the results of the Executive Committee's efforts with the guidelines that the Task Force voted to give to the Executive Committee to use for crafting commissions, the problems with the proposed redistricting plan get even worse. The three guidelines given to the Executive Committee were to (1) uphold neighborhood cohesiveness, (2) account for natural boundaries and barriers, and (3) create groups of single member districts that had similarities in makeup and often face similar issues. The Executive Committee's plan ignores those guidelines in several parts of the Ward, but let's look at two places in particular: the "long" commission described above that runs from Ward 1 to Maryland and the Carver-Langston neighborhood.

The "long" commission does not uphold neighborhood cohesiveness. Specifically, it splits the Bloomingdale neighborhood between two commissions with the part of the neighborhood south of S Street being in one commission and the part of north of S Street in another. Such bifurcation will make the work of Bloomingdale residents and the Bloomingdale Civic Association much harder, having to engage two commissions rather just one. As sitting commissioners, civic association officers, active community residents, or some mix of the three; we know the importance of ANCs in the life of neighborhoods and the difficulty that would arise from dealing with multiple ANCs on an issue of concern or need.

The "long" commission does not account for natural boundaries and barriers. A huge no-man's land separates the four districts in the western end of this commission from the four in the east. Specifically, the CSX/Metro train tracks, the Brentwood railyard, and the commercial area including the Brentwood post office and the Rhode Island Avenue shopping center (Home Depot and Giant) widely separate residents on one side of these barriers from those on the other.

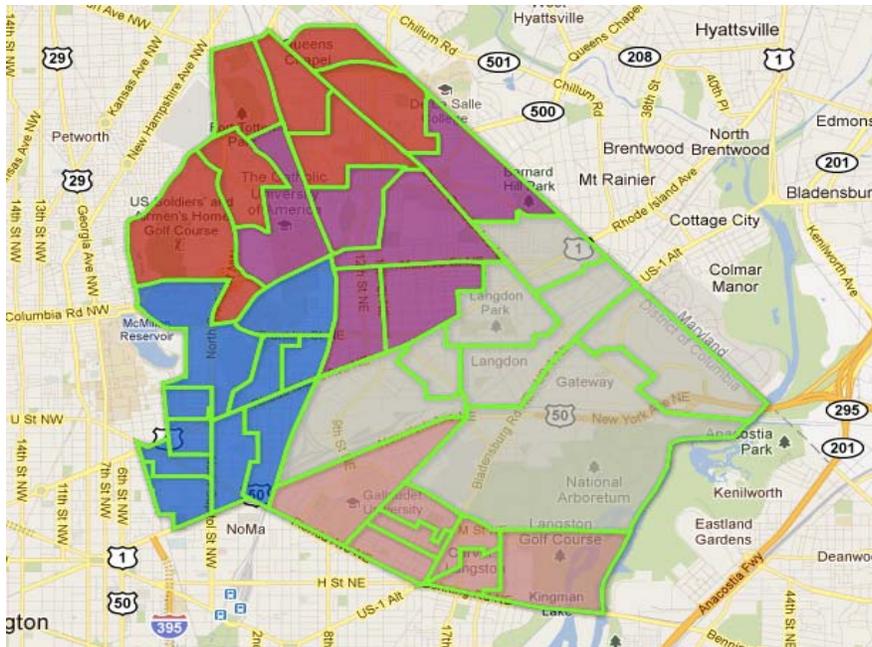
The "long" commission does not consist of neighborhoods with similar characteristics and issues. We already recounted above how this commission puts residents in an area often characterized by the term "East Shaw" with residents bumping up against Prince George's County. That alone should disqualify this commission. But another effect of this elongated commission was to cut off part of the Woodridge neighborhood from the rest of the neighborhood to the north and its immediate neighbors in Fort Lincoln to the south. These are residents that have much in common in terms of neighborhood facilities, needs, crime, and development.

The proposed changes in the southeastern corner of the ward are troubling as well. Prior to redistricting, all of Trinidad and Carver Langston were in the same ANC. These are both dense, urban neighborhoods, consisting of rowhouses and low-rise apartment buildings that share a border at Bladensburg Road. The new plan would put the eastern half of Carver Langston in a separate ANC from the western half of the neighborhood. The eastern half of the neighborhood would be in an ANC with neighborhoods like Fort Lincoln and Arboretum. These neighborhoods are from one-half to two miles away as the crow flies, and separated from each other by railroad tracks, a freeway, and the grounds of the National Arboretum. Why would folks on 19th Street NE be in the same ANC as people across these significant geographic barriers, yet not in the same ANC as people across the street in the same neighborhood?

Taken all together, the problems and pitfalls of the Executive Committee's proposed plan lead to the conclusion that the plan is seriously flawed and should not become law.

A Rational, Neighborhood-Centered Map

Instead, we still have time for a truly rational, neighborhood-centered plan to be ratified. Let's take a look.



Although this redistricting plan is not perfect and the Task Force as a whole would likely improve it, this easily understood plan meets all the criteria of the Task Force charge and the Office of Planning guidelines and treats the census numbers with integrity. It consists of five commissions, two more than we have currently, one less than the Executive Committee's plan. This plan reduces disparities in the populations of districts and it takes the best of the Executive Committee's plan and makes sure that all of the commissions make sense from the point of view of the neighborhoods that make up the commissions. This plan, moreover, upholds the three primary elements of the charge that the Task Force gave to the Executive Committee.

Fulfilling the two principles of redistricting:

- Reducing Disparities. In this proposal, the disparity between the largest single member district (in Trinidad 2,214) and the smallest (in Bloomingdale 1,850) is about 360 people, not the approximately 850-person disparity in the Executive Committee plan. Not only are these figures reasonable in terms of the Home Rule Charter's goal of approximately 2,000 people, but also both of these figures are justifiable because they allow the neighborhoods that they are in to remain intact. For example, the Trinidad district could possibly be made smaller, but doing so would probably mean slicing off an edge of Trinidad (a very cohesive neighborhood) and connecting to a district primarily made up of the Langston and Carver Terrace neighborhoods.
- Creating Commissions that group neighborhoods with strong commonalities. The revised plan adheres to the principle that redistricted commissions make more sense in terms of creating commissions that consist of single member districts that share common characteristics and issues. Instead of a "long" commission that combines very different neighborhoods that are also several miles apart, one of the revised districts encompasses the southwest corner of Ward 5 and combines Truxton Circle, Stronghold, Hanover, Edgewood, Eckington, and Bloomingdale. These neighborhoods are physically close to one another, have similar populations, having similar housing, share similar issues and concerns, and often connect with projects and activities.

Upholding the Task Force's three criteria for creating commissions:

- The neighborhood-centered commissions promote neighborhood cohesiveness. For example, the revised map brings Woodridge back together into a single commission. Likewise, all Bloomingdale districts are in the same commission. Finally, the revised commissions maintain the social and historical integrity of the Trinidad and Carver-Langston neighborhoods.
- The neighborhood-centered commissions take into account natural boundaries and barriers. For example, the revised commission in the southwest of the ward uses the Ward 1 line and the CSX railroad right of way as natural north-south boundaries. Another example is the district in the southeast corner of the Ward. Here, the huge open space of the arboretum makes for a natural boundary. In the counterpart commission in the Executive Committee's plan, the arboretum does not serve as the

south boundary; instead, that proposed commission links parts of the Langston and Carver neighborhood across the arboretum to the Gateway community on the other side of the arboretum.

- The neighborhood-centered commissions connect neighborhoods with similar characteristics and issues. For example, Bloomingdale, Truxton Circle, Edgewood, and Eckington are all in the same commission. Likewise, this plan maintains the integrity of the Trinidad and Carver-Langston neighborhoods. These neighborhoods have real overlapping interests and populations.

Addressing Possible Concerns with the Neighborhood-Centered Plan

As we noted above, no plan like this can be truly perfect, but what might appear to be weaknesses when just glancing at the map above turn out, on closer inspection, to be less of a concern than one might have originally thought. Let's look at four spots.

1. Armed Force Retirement Home/Park Place/The Cloisters (Zone 11, Northwest Ward 5)

Although this district on the northwestern edge of Ward 5 is part of a commission that runs from Rock Creek Church Road to Eastern Avenue, its placement in this commission is not as problematic as it might look. This district is made up of three "gated" communities: the Armed Forces Retirement Home, Park Place, and The Cloisters. Because they are self-contained communities, almost all of their issues are handled within their gates; they have almost no needs (whether constituent or neighborhood) that require ANC attention. Thus, the fact that these communities are connected to, for example, Queens Chapel and North Michigan Park, is of little problem or consequence to either set of neighborhoods.

2. Catholic University (Zone 12, North Central Ward 5)

Likewise, this district covers the entirety of the Catholic University of America campus and related institutions of the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, when we were creating this district, we felt that keeping CUA all together was important. That's why this district has this seemingly incongruous, skinny tip at the northern end of the district. This area is part of this district because all the people living in this area are connected to Catholic University. So we thought that, rather than make for a pretty district on the map, the better move is to keep this community intact.

3. Brentwood (Zone 25, South Central Ward 5)

Although this district is physically very large and looks very jagged, it works as a single member district because it respects natural boundaries and the residents overwhelmingly live in a small part of this geographic area. On the western end of the district bordered by the CSX tracks and Rhode Island and New York Avenues, the district has almost no residents at all, consisting of commercial areas and railroad storage areas. In the area east of West Virginia Avenue and south of New York Avenue, this huge area has a compact, tight knit community near Fifth District Headquarters, the Arboretum community. These residents' interests would

most definitely need to be represented, but the other 95% of this block of the district does not have residents. The bulk of this proposed district's residents are clustered north of New York Avenue and from around 14th Street and running east.

4. Ivy City (Zone 31, South Central Ward 5)

This proposed commission centers on three communities: Ivy City, Trinidad, and Carver-Langston. So although the physical boundaries of this commission stretch out, the western (commercial areas) and eastern (Langston Golf Course) ends have very few residents and fewer who rely on ANC support (*e.g.*, Gallaudet University). The bulk of the people live in the middle of the proposed commission. And this version keeps each neighborhood's integrity intact by not combining parts of separate neighborhoods, but it recognizes their common interests and concerns by connecting them together in the same commission.

Conclusion

As we said above, we want to have discussion about what could improve this redistricting map from the point of view of the affected neighborhoods and make it the best possible option for Ward 5 and its residents. But we believe this alternative provides a great base for that achievement. All Task Force members have worked hard on this project, and we can show the people of Ward 5 what we can do when we come together and put people and neighborhoods first. This alternative or a very close cousin should become law.