

## **Preserving the Independence of ANC 3/4G in the Civic Core Debate**

ANC 3/4G understands that the Office of Advisory Neighborhood Commissions has asked the DC Board of Ethics and Government Accountability to review conflict-of-interest standards for advisory neighborhood commissioners who are members or officers of community organizations, including advocacy groups, that may have business before the commissions on which they serve. At the same time, each ANC should consider potential conflicts it may face.

The following addresses a situation currently confronting ANC 3/4G. The central issue is straightforward. When ANC commissioners simultaneously hold leadership roles in advocacy organizations that are actively promoting a specific outcome on matters before the commission, the commission should establish clear safeguards to preserve public confidence in its deliberations. Those safeguards should include disclosure of outside affiliations and, where appropriate, recusal from participation in official commission actions on the matter.

Note: This statement is necessarily lengthy given the complexity of the issues involved.

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### **The Civic Core Debate and the Role of ANC 3/4G**

The future of the Chevy Chase Civic Core — the library, community center, and surrounding public land — is a highly consequential matter facing our neighborhood. Questions about housing, density, and the character of Connecticut Avenue deserve open and vigorous debate.

But the integrity of that debate depends on something equally important: confidence that Advisory Neighborhood Commission 3/4G operates as an objective civic forum serving the public interest, not as an extension of any special interest or advocacy effort.

### **The Institutional Role of Advisory Neighborhood Commissions**

Advisory Neighborhood Commissions occupy a unique role in District governance. As [independent advisory bodies](#), they operate as an adjunct to the DC Council — they do not report to the Mayor’s office or any District agency. While ANCs do not make policy decisions themselves, District law requires agencies to give their recommendations “great weight” on matters pending government action. That influence rests on the premise that commissions convey the considered views of neighborhood residents through a transparent deliberative process.

Commissioners, of course, often have views about neighborhood issues. The concern arises when commissioners simultaneously hold positions of leadership or influence in organizations whose express mission is to advocate a predetermined outcome in matters that come before the commission. If residents come to believe that ANC

recommendations reflect the advocacy positions of individual commissioners or special interest groups rather than the views of their constituents and open deliberation, the credibility underpinning the “great weight” framework begins to erode.

### **Advocacy Organizations and Potential Conflicts**

Recently, two ANC 3/4G commissioners became founding members of Chevy Chase Forward, a newly created organization whose website identifies its “[primary advocacy project](#)” as “bringing affordable housing to the Chevy Chase Civic Core.”

Forming advocacy groups around neighborhood issues is normal and healthy. Chevy Chase has a long tradition of civic engagement. The issue here is not whether people organize around policy goals; it is how those advocacy roles intersect with the responsibilities of elected ANC commissioners.

What heightens the concern in this case is the organizational structure of Chevy Chase Forward itself. The group [states](#) that it is organized as a [501\(c\)\(4\)](#) action organization. Under federal tax law, such organizations exist to influence public policy decisions, including mobilizing residents, lobbying for specific outcomes, and attempting to shape government action. Policy advocacy is therefore not incidental to Chevy Chase Forward — it is its central purpose.

### **The Significance of the Civic Core Redevelopment**

That distinction matters because the same policy issue – the future of housing at the Chevy Chase Civic Core – has been a recurring matter before ANC 3/4G for half a dozen years and remains front and center today. Just this past Monday (March 9), ANC 3/4G [spent](#) nearly an hour discussing how to engage effectively with the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development (DMPED), which is the District’s lead agency on the Civic Core.

While DMPED has selected a developer to redevelop the Civic Core, the DC Council has not yet approved the project. ANC 3/4G therefore continues to play a significant role in representing the community as the process moves forward. It also bears recalling that ANC policy, expressed in the commission’s July 2025 resolution, remains opposed to the redevelopment.

When ANC commissioners help found or lead an organization whose stated mission is to advocate a particular outcome in that same policy debate, two governance concerns arise, reflecting the structural tensions when advocacy roles and public responsibilities overlap.

### **Conflict-of-Interest Standards Under District Law**

The first concern is traditional conflict of interest. Under [DC Code](#), public officials of the District — including ANC commissioners — may not engage in outside employment, private business activity, or hold financial interests that conflict or appear to conflict with the fair, impartial, and objective performance of their official duties. Reinforcing the law is the District’s [Code of Conduct](#), which establishes general ethical principles requiring

officials to act impartially and avoid preferential treatment to any private organization or individual.

Read together, these provisions make clear that District officials must avoid not only direct financial conflicts or business interests but also situations in which their outside affiliations or activities could reasonably call into question their impartiality or create an appearance that their official decisions are not being made objectively in the public interest.

In this case, the concern is straightforward. If commissioners are founding members or leaders of a 501(c)(4) advocacy organization whose central project is promoting housing at the Civic Core, and they continue to participate in ANC deliberations about that redevelopment, residents may reasonably question whether the commission's deliberative process remains fully independent of outside advocacy efforts.

Even the appearance of partiality can undermine confidence in the process. This is especially important in the case of the Civic Core redevelopment because it is not a routine neighborhood matter. As proposed, it would be the largest development project in the history of ANC 3/4G, involving public land, major public facilities, and long-term changes to the neighborhood's look and feel.

### **Governance Risks When Advocacy and Public Office Overlap**

The second conflict concern involves the risk of what governance experts refer to as [regulatory or agency capture](#). This can occur when individuals operate on both sides of a policy process, helping lead an outside advocacy effort while also serving on the governmental body responsible for evaluating the issue.

ANC commissioners help set meeting agendas, shape resolutions, and cast votes on official commission positions. When those same individuals also help lead an advocacy organization seeking to influence the commission's position on the same issue, residents may reasonably question whether the distinction between advocacy and governance has been compromised.

District officials themselves have recognized these pressures. Draft planning documents (see attached) from the Office of Advisory Neighborhood Commissions note that well-organized special interest groups increasingly view ANCs as a gateway for advancing initiatives they hope will ultimately be adopted by the Mayor and Council.

Over time, the OANC notes, many grassroots organizations have evolved into sophisticated advocacy operations that actively lobby ANCs, endorse candidates, and attempt to shape commission policy positions.

The same analysis cautions that this environment can sometimes lead commissioners to become “more activist than public servants,” blurring the distinction between representing neighborhood consensus and promoting organized advocacy agendas.

Situations in which commissioners help lead an organization whose stated purpose is to advocate a specific redevelopment outcome — and then participate in ANC deliberations on that same issue — can reinforce the very institutional pressures District officials have warned could compromise the independence of the ANC system.

### **Safeguards to Preserve Public Confidence**

There are several practical steps that can help preserve public confidence while allowing civic advocacy to continue.

First, commissioners who are members of organizations advocating positions on matters before ANC 3/4G should provide full and transparent disclosure of those affiliations in a timely fashion consistent with existing ANC 3/4G bylaws (attached, see Article V, Section 11).

Second, commissioners who serve as founders, officers, directors, or other leaders of organizations actively advocating specific outcomes on matters before the commission should recuse themselves from voting on those matters.

Third, to preserve public trust, such recusal should also extend to participation in commission deliberations and drafting of resolutions as well as non-public briefings or meetings with District officials.

ANC commissioners frequently receive early or detailed information on pending projects from agencies such as DMPED, the Office of Planning, and the Office of Zoning. When commissioners are simultaneously involved in advocacy organizations seeking to influence the outcome of those same projects, participation in such briefings could create the perception that privileged governmental information might inform the strategy of an outside advocacy effort.

Establishing clear boundaries between outside advocacy and official commission business is essential to preserving public confidence in the ANC process.

### **Strengthening ANC Bylaws to Reinforce Institutional Independence**

Accordingly, in keeping with the BEGA review, I will propose that ANC 3/4G adopt new bylaws reinforcing the firewall between private advocacy and official commission deliberations. [DC Code](#) provides that “Each Commission shall establish bylaws governing its operation and internal structure,” provided those bylaws are consistent with other applicable laws.

These steps are intended to maintain the credibility of the ANC process while allowing robust civic advocacy to continue. They would apply equally to commissioners affiliated with organizations advocating any position on matters before the commission.

### **Preserving Public Trust in the ANC Process**

Chevy Chase Forward has every right to advocate for its vision of the Civic Core. Residents who disagree have every right to advocate for different outcomes. That is how civic debate should work.

But the ANC must remain distinct from any advocacy organization or special interest group. Its recommendations carry “great weight” under District law precisely because they are understood to reflect the considered views of neighborhood residents reached through an open and independent deliberative process.

Preserving that independence is essential to maintaining the credibility of the ANC system itself. Clear boundaries protect not only the integrity of the commission but also the credibility and effectiveness of the commissioners who serve on it.

For ANC 3/4G, it will help ensure that whatever ultimately emerges at the Civic Core – whether it includes housing, expanded public facilities, or another configuration – residents can trust that it resulted from a transparent and fair process.

In a community as civic-minded as Chevy Chase, protecting that trust must be priority number one.

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