

# **A conversation with Greater Greater Washington, September 20, 2017**

## **Participants**

- David Alpert – Founder and President, Greater Greater Washington (GGWash)
- Sarah Guidi – Managing Director, GGWash
- Alexander Berger – Program Officer, US Policy, Open Philanthropy Project

**Note:** These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by Mr. Alpert and Ms. Guidi.

## **Summary**

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Mr. Alpert and Ms. Guidi of GGWash as part of an update on our 2017 grant. Conversation topics included GGWash's work with its DC Comprehensive Plan coalition, its Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner organizing, plans for grassroots organizing, and fundraising.

## **DC Comprehensive Plan coalition**

The coalition around the DC Comprehensive Plan ("comp plan") is still going well.

GGWash submitted comments on a draft of the comp plan to the DC Office of Planning (OP) in June. GGWash worked with coalition members to write to the OP and DC Council members asking them to support the comp plan, but in general there hadn't been much coalition activity while waiting for the OP's response to the draft.

## **Opportunity to propose legislation**

Lawsuits that are being filed to block housing projects have received a lot of press attention and concern from developer and community groups. In at least one instance, the developer of a big project scaled down the project to qualify for by-right approval, rather than going through the discretionary approval process and facing the potential for a lawsuit. This resulted in less housing and the loss of some other neighborhood amenities. Many organizations, including community groups, are frustrated by this situation and have been asking the DC Council and mayor to take action before the comp plan process is finished (which will take at least another year).

GGWash is working to propose legislation on this issue that could be potentially implemented before the comp plan update is completed. GGWash excerpted some language from its comp plan draft that covered its three major priorities and met with lawyers to get that language ready to propose as legislation. This was made much easier by the fact that, during work on the comp plan, the coalition had already reached agreement on priorities and language that coalition members could all support.

GGWash's proposed bill could accomplish some but not all of GGWash's goals for the comp plan. The bill would change some parts of the Zoning Enabling Act to give the Zoning Commission more freedom. The bill also includes "whereas" clauses with language similar to the proposed comp plan, meaning that passing the bill would be a strong signal to the OP that the council supports the comp plan's goals. However, the comp plan draft includes longer-term language that encourages housing construction more broadly and has the OP study potential ways of adding housing (e.g. under the Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing framework). The comp plan would also be necessary for zoning rules to change (the DC Council can't legislate zoning).

This bill can be proposed by either the mayor or by council members. Ideally, council members would already be familiar with and support the bill before it's proposed; GGWash plans to work with other groups to try to lay that groundwork.

### **Decision to focus on the comp plan**

At the start of the grant, GGWash considered working on housing opportunities in Arlington or Montgomery County, but decided to mainly focus on the DC comp plan because it seemed like a significant and time-sensitive opportunity, and because GGWash had more influence in DC. Ideally, GGWash would like to do organizing and policy work in Virginia and Maryland as well as DC.

### **Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner (ANC) organizing**

GGWash's ANC organizing is going well. GGWash is working on equipping pro-housing commissioners to be able to engage effectively with the zoning board and to better understand zoning law.

ANCs are also doing work on priority bus corridors. Organizing ANCs around local issues like bus corridors is an opportunity to build relationships that can then be usefully leveraged when organizing on city-level issues like housing policy, which tend to be more controversial and more difficult to reach consensus on.

GGWash recently met with a group of potentially pro-housing ANCs from wards all around the city.

### **YIMBY grassroots organizing**

Based on the positive experiences that they have heard about from other groups around the country, GGWash is considering experimenting with "Yes-in-my-back-yard" (YIMBY) grassroots organizing, focusing on local neighborhood issues and organizing residents around specific projects in DC, northern Virginia, and Maryland. This work is led by David Whitehead.

Originally, GGWash identified places it might like to try this kind of work and reached out to its readers in those areas for suggestions on issues to get involved in; most of the suggestions ended up not being good fits. GGWash is now looking for housing development issues in a more targeted way while being more flexible on geography. GGWash expects to be able to get involved in this kind of organizing

wherever there's a good opportunity (i.e. it doesn't need to choose one jurisdiction to focus on ahead of time). GGWash is looking for a pilot project for this work, including looking outside of DC.

Last year, about half of the people who responded to GGWash's reader survey were based in DC, about a quarter were in Virginia, and about a quarter were in Maryland (with a small number outside those areas). GGWash's readers mostly live in walkable urban areas (e.g. Silver Spring, Arlington, Mount Rainier, Alexandria, Reston, Tysons), which is where GGWash expects most potentially controversial projects to arise.

## **New hire**

Jonathan Neeley has left his staff editor role and GGWash hired Julie Strupp as Lead Editor over the summer.

## **Fundraising**

GGWash has 60% of its 2018 budget secured and has some funding in reserves. One of GGWash's priorities for next year is developing more sustainable revenue sources.

## **Funding from DC Sustainable Transportation (DCST)**

DCST is funding GGWash to do advocacy around transportation (including bus, biking, and walking), restricted to work in DC and Arlington. DCST plans to give GGWash \$130,000 next year and to increase its support by 3% each year after that, with some possibility that it could increase a bit more. GGWash has a 3-year contract with DCST that could be renewed. DCST's funding comes from Business Improvement District taxes, which provide a sustainable revenue stream.

As part of GGWash's partnership with DCST, Mr. Alpert has taken on the role of DCST Executive Director.

This funding supports Mr. Alpert's position, as well as some of Ms. Guidi's, Ms. Strupp's, and Mr. Whitehead's time.

## **Other funding sources**

GGWash is testing out advertising on its blog and will likely roll this out at the end of the year.

GGWash's 10-year anniversary is this year. It might plan an events program around that and try to get sponsorships.

The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) paid GGWash for its work on the MetroGreater campaign. GGWash is working on another campaign with WMATA this year.

GGWash gets funding in the \$10,000 to \$20,000 range from a few local foundations. It also plans to pursue funding from some larger foundations.

GGWash is aiming to increase donations from individuals and from its reader drive. GGWash redesigned its website this year, and some of the fundraising strategies on the site that worked last year didn't work as well this year. It plans to try to do a couple more donation appeals each year.

*All Open Philanthropy Project conversations are available at*  
<http://www.openphilanthropy.org/research/conversations>