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DAGSpace: Public Comment to the Planning Commission Re: Ordinance NO. 090170 the "Central Delaware Riverfront Overlay District"

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Janice Woodcock is the former Executive Director of the Philadelphia City Planning Commission and now a practicing architect at KieranTimberlake. The following is an expanded text of her recent testimony to the Philadelphia City Planning Commission in support of the Central Delaware Overlay District legislation.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in favor of the proposed Central Delaware Overlay District legislation, Bill 099170, before you today. I was fortunate to have served the Commission during the creation of the plan and would like to call your attention to the breakthrough the Civic Vision represents.

Admittedly, the planning process for the Central Delaware plan was not perfect. The need for the plan rose out of a reaction to state mandated gaming, making the process contentious, to say the least. The plan was not led by local government, instead rising out of the generosity of private foundations, preventing the plan from becoming public policy immediately.

But there is a silver lining. Citizens from the neighborhoods along the river came together and helped to generate the plan – in a populist movement not seen in recent memory. What a boost this has been for the status of planning and civic involvement: The plan has attracted the attention of civic groups, the media, and even our partners in state and federal agencies – who in the recent past have thought so little of Philadelphia's land use practices that they have done our planning for us.

And what about our land use practices? As many of you know, over the past decade owners of waterfront land have simply selected a zoning classification to fit their project and sought re-zoning or variances to accommodate their proposals. None of the

zoning classifications in the Philadelphia zoning code, not even the recent Waterfront Redevelopment District (WRD), addresses the complex nature of waterfront lots. Worse, the piecemeal nature of the zoning changes has made the coordination of design ideas impossible.

You must also know (but it bears repeating), that the process used to develop land use policy puts Philadelphia's government officials in a compromised position. For elected officials, constituents expect to be served. They ask their representatives to solve financial problems generated by their own investment decisions. For appointed officials and civil servants, the proper development of policy has gone undone until recently, as staff has had to scramble to field the flurry of rezones, new zoning provisions, and variances generated by the process. There must be a better way.

If the City continues avoid the practice of urban design and continues to practice land use planning as it has over the last 20 years, not only will our waterfront be at risk, but the city as a whole. Philadelphia's urban landscape will pale in comparison to that of other cities, who under similar circumstances had the confidence to promote planning - and use it to unlock potential, market the city, and propose fundamental change. By urban design, I am talking about a problem solving process that is transparent and science based. It is one that draws from many disciplines to generate a range of options, balances myriad competing interests, and uses a collaborative process to select the best result. It is transparent and the results are binding.

On the waterfront, a review of proposals made over the past five years illustrates outdated ideas about what a river can be for a city. We have seen all manner of towers, garages, and private decks to the water with very little consideration of public access, water quality, or public views.

The lull in the marketplace provides an opportunity to revisit these proposals. Interim zoning must provide a placeholder to allow our local government to demonstrate the benefits of change – drawing from the best talent available.

The best way to gain support from the private sector is to base new zoning on an urban design plan that illustrates through graphics, renderings, and illustrative diagrams how new rules can work. Zoning must establish appropriate densities and a mix of land uses that will create value.

The City's design and planning staff have the values and capacity to solve this problem; now it needs the proper legal standing to perform.

Once this zoning overlay has passed and protections are in place, I hope the Commission will monitor the progress on the creation of an urban design-based master plan and advocate for the resources to implement it. This is an opportunity we can't afford to miss.