

Here's one project a group of high-profile D.C. developers are working on together

*By Karen Goff – Staff Reporter, Washington Business Journal
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Some major players in D.C. development will work with D.C. Councilman Vincent Gray on improving the economy in his home ward.

Gray, the former D.C. mayor who was re-elected to the council in the fall, has formed a 12-member **Ward 7 Economic Development Advisory Council**. The group, which held its first meeting this week, is **chaired by:**

Warren Williams, CEO of The Warrenton Group.

Also in the group:

Bill Alsup, Hines Interests' senior managing director;

Douglas Jemal, founder and president of Douglas Development Corp.;

Chris Donatelli, president and CEO, Donatelli Development;

Jair Lynch, president and CEO of Jair Lynch Real Estate Partners;

Chris Smith, chairman and CEO of WC Smith Co.;

Sandy Wilkes, chairman of The Wilkes Co.; and

Robin Zeigler, chief operating officer of Cedar Realty Trust Inc. (which in 2016 acquired East River Park Shopping Center on Benning Road).

"As a group, we are stronger together, and if we are able to share information, we have got a better chance at critical mass coming," Williams said. "We've got Jemal, he can create spaces out of nowhere. Maybe we can get a Hecht's building going in Ward 7. We need some of that magic."

The council plans to address how to spark development in one of the District's most economically disadvantaged wards, Williams said. Bringing daytime traffic, tech businesses, grocery stores, sit-down restaurants and additional housing are all variables, and he is particularly interested in the opportunity to advance the effort, even boost density, through a revised D.C.'s comprehensive plan.

Mayor Muriel Bowser's office is also working to boost the east of the river economy. Both Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development Brian Kenner and Deputy Mayor for Greater Economic Opportunity Courtney Snowden continue their work on projects such as the Anacostia Waterfront Initiative and Skyland Town Center, and on programs such as summer youth employment and small business support.

Gray swept back into political office in January, immediately taking aim at Bowser on economic development, public safety and health issues. He has not rejected a possible second mayoral campaign against Bowser in 2018.

Williams, developer of Ward 7 housing Deanwood Hills and Kenilworth Courts, among others, said the group plans to meet monthly and deliver a report to Gray.

Gray said the group will bring new energy to a “largely dormant and sleepy retail experience” in Ward 7.

“The Advisory Council will focus exclusively on the development and implementation of solutions to address the glaring gaps and new job opportunities to Ward 7 and to develop vibrant, sustainable commercial corridors in the Ward,” the councilman said in a release.

Gray said before his term began that his goals included lowering the commercial tax rate in Wards 7 and 8; working to extend the H Street NE streetcar line to Ward 7; reviewing workforce housing policies; and revising the comprehensive plan.

Others on the advisory council are:

Pedro Alfonso, chairman and CEO, Dynamic Concepts Inc.;

David Alvaranga, owner, Liberty Tax Service;

Leila Batties, land use and zoning partner at Holland & Knight; and

Marisa Flowers, owner and principal, Green Door Advisors.