

PRESS RELEASE

Friends of McMillan Park

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DC Councilmembers Criticize Efforts to Neutralize McMillan Development Opponents

District of Columbia Council Chairman Phil Mendelson, joined by Councilmember Elissa Silverman, reacted strongly to community testimony at an oversight hearing on Friday, March 6th. Citizens raised numerous concerns during the session about the use of DC taxpayer funds to pay Baltimore-based public relations firm, Fontaine & Company, to discredit District residents who oppose the Administration's plan to commercially develop the District-owned 25-acre portion of historic landmark McMillan Park. The DC Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development (DMPED) and its development consultant, Vision McMillan Partners (VMP), retained the PR firm with the express goals of "discredit[ing] and neutralize[ing] the impact of opposition," as laid out in [scope-of-work documents](#) uncovered via citizen FOIA requests.

Chairman Mendelson called the scandal "a bit of PR disaster" during the seven-hour DMPED performance oversight hearing and acknowledged the existence of DC Government documents "that talk about embarrassing the community." At-large Councilmember Elissa Silverman added, "There are some very questionable things in these materials."

Questions about who paid Fontaine & Co. recurred throughout the hearing. An invoice dated December 23, 2013 for expenditures for Fontaine's services was signed by Aakash Thakkar of EYA on behalf of VMP, and approved for payment by DMPED on January 22, 2014. However, Mr. Thakkar stated during the Friday oversight hearing, "No public funds were used to suppress community opposition. [The Fontaine contract] was, however, to give folks a safe and comfortable place on our dime, not on the government's dime, to support the project."

Referring to other documents suggesting that DMPED was credited back for the Fontaine payment, Chairman Mendelson said, "It would be best to have all the information out, and if DMPED is in any way implicated, say so now [so that] we don't have to deal with why it was covered up."

"VMP exists solely to manage the McMillan project, and is paid by DMPED," commented Andrea Rosen, a resident of Ward 2 and member of Friends of McMillan Park. "However the money was shuffled around, the fact remains that taxpayer funding was used to discredit the legitimacy of District residents who want to comment on the disposition and development of their own public property."

McMillan Park activist, Debby Hanrahan, alluded in her testimony to the potential criminality of the proposed development deal. Chairman Mendelson responded that he was open to holding a special hearing on McMillan if necessary.

Robin Diener, Director of the Library Renaissance Project, observed that "one grace-note could be Brian Kenner's assurance to Chairman Mendelson, during an earlier hearing on his nomination to be the new head of DMPED, that things will be done differently on Kenner's watch, per instructions from Mayor Muriel Bowser. The community surrounding McMillan Park has repeatedly called for an international design competition to adaptively reuse the landmark site. This would be a hugely exciting project to essentially create a central park for DC."

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