

DC Historic Districts Coalition
Scott Roberts, Bloomingdale Historic District
Email: ScottRoberts01@outlook.com

Statement Before the
DC Council, Committee on the Whole
Oversight of the Office of Planning
February 23, 2023

Good morning, Chair Mendelson and Council Members,

My name is Scott Roberts and I am a resident of the Bloomingdale Historic District who is speaking on behalf of the DC Historic Districts Coalition (DC HDC). The DC HDC is an informal alliance of individuals and organizations representing Washington, DC's 37 neighborhood historic districts, as well as other individuals and organizations interested in the city's historic preservation, including residents of potential future historic districts.

The DC HDC has identified five issue areas for the coming year:

- 1) First and foremost, DC HDC would like to highlight the need for increased and consistent enforcement of design guidelines in the city's neighborhood historic districts. As you are aware, there are two types of design guidelines: city-wide general design guidelines, which provide guidance on building components, as well as other important topics, like new construction and sustainability, and historic district-specific guidelines. HPO and HPRB promulgate these guidelines. Violations of these design guidelines occur regularly and, often times, it is the historic districts' residents who are responsible for reporting these infractions to HPO and the Department of Buildings. I would now like to provide a brief overview of just a few of the violations that have occurred in recent years:
 - 420 11th Street SE in the Capitol Hill Historic District ([HPA 21-253](#)) – This case from June 2021 considered illegally installed windows. The HPRB correctly decided that “the outstanding unpermitted windows must be addressed and corrected.” DC HDC supports the strict enforcement of design guidelines and HPRB action to remedy illegal work that disregards the relevant guidelines. Because of actions like this, a historic district's character and integrity can be retained.
 - 302 South Carolina Avenue SE in the Capitol Hill Historic District ([HPA 19-140](#)) – This case from January 2019 involved a two-story rear addition. Despite the rear addition being visible from a nearby side street, the HPRB unanimously approved the design concept with some modifications. DC HDC has concerns with decisions like this, which allow for oversize additions that dilute the integrity of a historic district.
 - The Bloomingdale Historic District is known for its Queen Anne style homes with turrets of patterned slate. This rhythm of repeating and alternating turrets, with rooftop ornaments, enhances the historic district's character and provides for an exceptionally rich streetscape. Therefore, the [Bloomingdale Historic District Design Guidelines](#) state: “The replacement of roofing materials on turrets should replicate the pattern, color, scale and visual appearance of the original roof material.” Unfortunately, HPO does not consistently require homeowners to adhere to these guidelines related to craftsmanship and materials. Some

DC Historic Districts Coalition

Scott Roberts, Bloomingdale Historic District

Email: ScottRoberts01@outlook.com

homeowners use the required slate, while others are allowed to use asphalt shingles, in violation of the guidelines.

- One recent example occurred on the 100 block of Adams Street NW, where a homeowner was re-shingling a turret without a permit and with asphalt shingles. An inspector came by and issued a “Stop Work Order” before the job was completed. After contacting HPO, the owner was allowed to finish the project with asphalt shingles. Nearby, on the 100 block of W Street NW, a similar situation occurred. However, this owner was ordered by HPO to remove the asphalt shingles and use slate instead.
- 2) Also on this topic of general design guidelines, DC HDC believes that there is a need for a user-friendly update to the design guidelines. Design guidelines are critical to the success of historic preservation, as they help facilitate the long-term stewardship of properties within historic districts. Therefore, these guidelines need to be clear and easy to understand for both historic district residents and the general public. While some of the existing general design guidelines are well done, such as those focused on *Door Repair and Replacement* and *Window Repair and Replacement*, most of them are outdated and do not include color photographs and representative, contemporary examples. Instead, most of the design guidelines include black and white sketches that do not fully illustrate the specific topic, and are not necessarily useful in practice. In particular, *Introduction to the Historic Preservation Guidelines*, *Roofs, Porches and Steps*, *Additions to Historic Buildings*, *New Construction in Historic Districts*, and *Accommodating Persons with Disabilities* need to be revised and improved, so that they continue to be relevant.

The 2017 revision of *The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* and its accompanying guidelines are a good example of comprehensive, illustrative, and clear design guidelines.

Additionally, in regards to the recent Mayor’s Agent decision, HPA 22-145, which allowed for the use of “Hardie” plank at 528 4th Street SE in the Capitol Hill Historic District, DC HDC is supportive of design guidelines updates that provide cost effective solutions for homeowners, yet continue to preserve a historic district’s character and identity.

- 3) In addition to user-friendly design guidelines, a modernized and user-friendly HPO website is necessary, as it is regularly referenced by the historic preservation community and the general public. In addition to its roles in landmark designation and design review, HPO serves a critical education and outreach function, and the agency’s website should reflect this important role. The website includes many valuable resources — including the DC historic district brochures and maps, *DC Architects Directory*, *DC Builders and Developers Directory*, and *Ward Heritage Guides*, just to name a handful of examples — but DC HDC is concerned that these resources are not easily accessed and are, therefore, underutilized. Also, project plans and other supporting materials related to the design review of individual cases should continue to be updated in a timely manner and presented in a straightforward way. Overall, a streamlined, easily navigable website supports HPO’s public service role.
- 4) Like other historic preservation advocates in the District, DC HDC is requesting increased funding for the DC Historic Homeowner Grant Program. As the city addresses the affordable housing challenge,

DC Historic Districts Coalition

Scott Roberts, Bloomingdale Historic District

Email: ScottRoberts01@outlook.com

which is currently confronting every major American city, it is time to fully invest in homeowner assistance. This assistance has proven to be a successful preservation and economic tool. Thus, income-based assistance is critical to the long-term success of our city's historic districts and their residents. We are also requesting that the grant program be expanded to encompass *all* 37 of the city's neighborhood historic districts, as it currently only applies to less than half (16) of DC's neighborhood historic districts.

Finally, DC HDC would like to recognize the city, specifically HPO staff, for their work in 2022 providing access to economic assistance for the residents of The Kenesaw/Renaissance, a historic multi-unit building in the Mount Pleasant Historic District.

- 5) In closing, DC HDC would like to see better integration of the Office of Planning's Small Area Plans and preservation planning. Although existing and eligible historic landmarks are referenced, there is limited discussion of historic preservation in the *Chevy Chase Small Area Plan*. This is all the more remarkable, considering past and continuing efforts to designate the neighborhood as a historic district, and historic preservation's role in retaining a neighborhood's sense of place and identity. Nonetheless, DC HDC is pleased to see the thematic incorporation of "historic and cultural preservation" in the *Congress Heights Small Area Plan*, and we hope that this is a template for future small area plans.

Thank you for providing the time for me to testify today. I look forward to any questions you may have, and look forward to working with you throughout the coming year.