



**Testimony to the Committee on the Whole
Oversight of the Office of Planning
Thursday, February 23, 2023**

Rebecca Miller on Behalf of the DC Preservation League

Good afternoon, Chairman Mendelson. My name is Rebecca Miller, Executive Director of the DC Preservation League (DCPL), Washington's citywide nonprofit that for more than 50 years has been dedicated to the preservation and protection of the historic and built environment of our nation's capital. I am pleased to be here today and thank you for the opportunity to provide DCPL's evaluation on the performance of the Office of Planning (OP) this past year. DCPL works closely with the Historic Preservation Office (HPO) and its parent agency, the Office of Planning, to help carry out our mission and in doing so support DC-led initiatives that successfully utilize historic preservation as a tool for economic growth and vitality.

DCPL has had a longstanding relationship with the Historic Preservation Office to tell the histories of our unique and diverse neighborhoods. Recently, we have been working collaboratively to develop a more complete story of Washington's residents through context studies on Chinese and Korean American communities, Women's Suffrage, and African American Civil Rights. DCPL will also be collaborating with HPO on studies associated with DC's Latino history, as well as a survey of African American Affordable Housing. These studies, funded by the National Park Service, help identify priorities for historic protection in traditionally underserved communities, and provide a foundation for broader public education.

DCPL values its relationship with HPO and, as in past years, offers the following testimony to assist this excellent staff with their vital work.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE

- HPO does not receive the financial support it requires to be successful through OP's budget. HPO receives much of its funding through the federal Historic Preservation Fund and from other agencies such as DDOT. Since 2010, a few thousand buildings have been added to the DC Inventory of Historic Sites through the designation of additional districts including Kingman Park, Old West End, Union Market, Bloomingdale, and Colony Hill. This expansion of coverage has increased the design review load for what DCPL and affected community members perceive to be an already overworked HPO staff. HPO is an essential ally in enhancing the economic and cultural vitality of our city. Continuing to underfund the office and to rely on federal funds for HPO staff salaries is detrimental to the city's historic preservation program as a whole.
- Enforcement remains a critical problem. With the construction boom throughout the city, illegal construction is even more difficult to identify and control. HPO worked previously with DCRA and will work now with the new Department of Buildings (DOB) on these issues, but both rely on complaints from vigilant neighbors who are frustrated by the lack of reliable follow-up on their complaints. We hope that with the creation of the Department of Buildings in October 2022 a new strategy can be devised to combat illegal construction and violations of the property maintenance code which too often result in demolition by neglect.

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DCPL has testified for years about these interrelated enforcement issues. Because of the difficulty in achieving meaningful progress, the lack of reliable enforcement remains a key threat to the character of our historic neighborhoods and the quality of life in the District.

- Historic preservation programs are important to the residents of the District of Columbia, no less so than humanities or the arts. Historic districts and landmarks are indeed significant aspects of the city's identity and character. Despite this, there is very little investment in public education, outreach, or the Historic Homeowner Grant Program for low- and moderate-income homeowners. DCPL urges the city to expand all of these programs. The grant program should have a dedicated funding source that we hope the Chairman may help us identify, and be extended to all historic districts and landmarks across the city, with the only restriction being income. Extension of the program this past year to a single coop/condominium building with well-publicized external maintenance issues (the Kenesaw) has prompted the owners of other multi-family historic properties to ask for equal treatment. There needs to be a wider conversation about the use of public funds for the restoration of privately-owned historic resources.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD (HPRB)

The HPRB is the official body of advisors appointed by the Mayor to guide the government and public on preservation matters in the District. The HPRB helps implement and maintain DC's historic preservation law as one of the strongest ordinances of its kind in the country. Currently, the nine-member HPRB has 4 vacancies – an historian, archaeologist and two “citizen” members. Functioning with this statutorily required minimum risks a lack of quorum at a future meeting.

Notwithstanding these legal requirements and the important role that preservation plays in the economic development of the city, Mayor Bowser has allowed these vacancies to accumulate. She has also nominated individuals who have not shown prior interest in historic preservation and who do not come from all parts of the city, statutory eligibility requirements. In addition to professional work related to preservation in the fields of architecture or one of the other disciplines enumerated in the law, candidates could show interest by simply living in an historic district, enjoying historic walking tours, or even knowing about the DC Preservation League. The Board currently has no members from Wards 1, 4, 7, or 8 which have 3500, 250, 517 and 600+ protected buildings, respectively.

DCPL asks the Chairman to encourage the Mayor to put forth candidates expeditiously who have the professional qualifications required, demonstrate interest in historic preservation, and represent all areas of the city.

OFFICE OF PLANNING

When the DC Council enacted the Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act of 1978, protection of historic and cultural properties became an important policy goal for the city. Since then, the Act has played a vital role in the development of the city's neighborhoods and downtown, resulting in a tremendous revitalization of DC's business corridors and historic residential neighborhoods.

Nevertheless, despite the many positive developments directly attributable to historic preservation, it has somehow become the enemy for advocates of affordable housing and sustainability – individuals and groups that spread misinformation and cause dissension within the city. Unfortunately, what we have seen from the Office of Planning is a less than forthright defense of the preservation program and long-standing policies of the DC Government. We hope that under Director Anita Cozart's leadership the many benefits of historic preservation are highlighted and incorporated into conversations on planning, affordability and combatting climate change.

DCPL is optimistic about the ongoing discussions regarding incentives for commercial to residential conversions, which have been successfully adopted in other cities. Reuse of existing buildings prevents waste, avoids unnecessary carbon pollution and helps produce more affordable housing.

Finally, DCPL would like to address the Mayor's desire to "tweak" the Height of Buildings Act. The District of Columbia's character is one of its greatest assets, and its iconic skyline is one of the most recognizable in the world. Much of this is because of the Act. The assertion that increasing the height limit for downtown buildings to 160 feet will not have an impact on the city's landscape was debunked when studied less than a decade ago. Additionally, at the time, this proposal was resoundingly opposed by the residents of this city. Topographically, the core of downtown is approximately 30 feet higher in elevation than low-lying Pennsylvania Avenue. Therefore, a 160-foot-tall building downtown – in line with the Mayor's proposal – would appear taller than those along the avenue, disrupting views and creating cavernous streets. The Height Act is *not* standing in the way of affordable housing, economic development, or any other important goal.

The preservation of historic buildings is a vital component to the resurgence of Washington's neighborhoods and downtown. Preserving the cultural and built heritage of our city provides endless educational opportunities for residents and attracts millions of visitors each year. The protection and enhancement (i.e. restoration, rehabilitation and adaptive reuse) of Washington's historic resources should be a top priority for the Mayor and the DC Council. It is the Council's responsibility to ensure that the Historic Preservation Office is adequately funded and staffed to meet its growing workload. It is far past time for the Council to acknowledge the financial responsibilities that flow from the statutory responsibilities taken on with adoption of the Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act in 1978. DC's decades-old historic preservation program should be one of the city's proudest policy accomplishments, and its continued success depends upon full support from the DC Government.

We look forward to our continued work with both the OP and the HPO and thank you for your time and attention to these matters.