



**Testimony to the Committee on Business and Economic Development  
Performance Oversight Hearing for the  
Deputy Mayor Planning and Economic Development  
January 31, 2024**

*Rebecca Miller on Behalf of the DC Preservation League*

Good morning, Councilmember McDuffie and the members of this committee.

My name is Rebecca Miller and, I am the Executive Director of the DC Preservation League (DCPL). For more than 50 years, the DC Preservation League (DCPL) has served as Washington's citywide nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated to preserving and protecting our city's historic resources. DCPL invests significant time, effort, and funds to work with local agencies and stakeholders on preservation-related issues across the District of Columbia. The organization works diligently to ensure that all preservation projects encourage community development that is socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable.

For years, DCPL has appeared before Council to express its concerns over the deterioration of properties under the responsibility of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development (DMPED). This ongoing failure to maintain properties resulted in the catastrophic loss of the last remaining historic barn in the District of Columbia, which burned down in a fire in December 2002. While you may think that it was just a barn, it was an instrumental piece to an ensemble of buildings that tell the story of the agricultural history of the District of Columbia and, specifically, the St. Elizabeths campus, a National Historic Landmark. The DCFD incident investigators agreed that an open flame inside the building was the cause and that the site was a hangout spot for transient individuals who may have set the fire for warmth or cooking.

This well-known "hangout spot" is DMPED's responsibility. While the focus has been on the southern end of the campus, this unique historic property was left to rot. The 2012 Master Plan for St. Elizabeths East called for the retention and reuse of the farm complex, including the 1884 dry barn. And I quote: "Restoration of the farm complex will offer opportunities for physical activity and access to healthy food that enhance the neighborhood's livability. Additional programming on the site could include child, youth, and adult education, workforce training, small business incubation and development, and potential employment opportunities, while future building rehabilitation could provide an additional community resource such as meeting rooms." Consistent with this approved Master Plan, the Barn must now be reconstructed to restore the historic integrity of the farm complex and provide these intended programming opportunities. No action has been taken on this since our testimony in 2023.

The next buildings of concern are the historic Jon Fox Slater and John Mercer Langston Schools that were built for African American children. The contract for redevelopment of the site, which dates to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was awarded almost two years ago and is according to DMPED's pipeline website "in negotiation." Yet during this time, DMPED has not taken any steps to secure the school or deter continued deterioration. DCPL has asked

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the Council for years to intervene. The result of this failure to take preventive steps will be a much more costly redevelopment of the site.

DCPL's final example of neglect by the District Government is Anne Archbold Hall, located on the Reservation 13 campus. Built in 1931-32 as the Nurses' Residence of the Gallinger Municipal Hospital (later, Gallinger Memorial and ultimately DC General Hospital), this was originally a major teaching institution for nurses. The site was designated a DC Landmark in 2006. DMPED's database shows the parcel that includes Archbold Hall as "in negotiation," placing maintenance responsibility on the District and not the future lessors. The pictures attached to DCPL's testimony speak for themselves.

The District Government should be embarrassed by the condition of these important buildings for which it has direct responsibility. Continuing to neglect them will only increase the cost of rehabilitation and renovation in the future.

The Mayor stated during her launch of the Downtown/Chinatown Task Force that the city has been successful in creating new and dynamic neighborhoods across DC by putting old spaces to new uses. EXACTLY! DC's historic neighborhoods and downtown have seen tremendous revitalization over the past two decades. DC's downtown can do it again but its history and architecture cannot be ignored. The new Deputy Mayors should embrace DC's vast collection of historic buildings and acknowledge that the redevelopment of these properties has been proven to support a wide range of public benefits, including small business incubation, affordable housing, sustainable development, climate action and neighborhood stabilization. DMPED should be setting a high standard for stewardship and championing the reuse of the city's historic resources.

DCPL looks forward to working with DMPED in the future on proposals for the compatible redevelopment of historic sites that return these significant resources to productive and economically viable uses.

Thank you for your time.