



**Testimony to the Committee on the Whole
Oversight of the Office of Planning
Thursday, February 22, 2024**

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 comments 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 its mission and in doing so support DC-led initiatives that successfully utilize historic preservation as a tool for economic growth and vitality across our city.

DCPL has had a longstanding partnership with HPO 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. Forthcoming studies include a context study 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.

DCPL thanks the Council for including funding for an additional Archaeologist for HPO. This filled staff position was long needed, and will help ensure the ongoing high performance of our city's archaeology program.

- Enforcement remains a critical problem. With the construction boom throughout the city, illegal construction is even more difficult to identify and control. HPO works with the Department of Buildings (DOB) on these

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issues, but both agencies rely on complaints from vigilant neighbors who are frustrated by the lack of reliable follow-up on these violations. We hope 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.

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 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. DCPL thanks the Council for expanding the Homeowner Grant Program citywide, however, staffing and funding limitations still make the program essentially unavailable to the bulk of eligible property owners across the city. Extension of the program in 2002 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.

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. Just as we testified in 2023, the nine-member HPRB still has 4 vacancies, one of which is a professional position required by the National Park Service. The Archaeology position has been vacant for more than 15 months. 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. 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.

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.

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.