



**Testimony to the Committee on the Whole
Oversight of the Office of Planning
Thursday, February 25, 2025**

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 preserving and protecting the historic and built environment of our nation's capital. 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 long partnered 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 the history of the Latino Community, Women's Suffrage, and the history of Affordable Housing in the city, with a special emphasis on housing for African Americans. 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. Funding for several staff members comes from the National Park Service's Historic Preservation Fund and other agencies such as DDOT. More than 95% of HPO staff's work is regulatory, meaning reviewing projects and processing permit applications, and is essential to enhancing our city's economic and cultural vitality. Continuing to underfund this office and relying on federal funds for HPO staff salaries could be detrimental to the city's historic preservation program in the years to come.
- Enforcement remains a critical problem. Illegal construction is even more challenging to identify and control. HPO works with the Department of Buildings (DOB) on these 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 District's quality of life.

- Historic districts and landmarks are significant aspects of the city's identity and character. Despite this, there is very little government 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 unavailable to the bulk of eligible property owners across the city. The program's extension 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. DCPL would like to thank the Chairman for your assistance last year in filling the HPRB vacancies with qualified members who provide value to their respective roles. While seven members is better than the five that were functioning this time last year, the sudden loss of one of its longest-tendered members has left a critical professional vacancy. DCPL asks the Chairman to encourage the Mayor to put forth two candidates to fill the Architectural Historian professional position and one other member with a demonstrated interest in historic preservation.

OFFICE OF PLANNING

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

DCPL is aware of the efforts to amend the DC Historic Preservation Act. However, I will note that the Mayor celebrated meeting the goal of 36,000 new units in 2024. Earlier than the target and without changes to the Preservation Law or The Height Act.

In the lead-up to the creation of a new Comprehensive Plan (DC 2050), OP-HPO needs to understand the positive and negative impacts current historic preservation initiatives create within the District. Historic preservation is said to strengthen communities by contributing to small business incubation, affordable housing, and neighborhood stabilization. Other arguments claim that historic preservation is exclusionary, encourages the displacement of BIPOC communities, and inflates housing costs. Many cities, including New York, Los Angeles, Phoenix, Miami, Indianapolis, Buffalo, Baltimore, Nashville, San Antonio, and Pittsburgh, have studied the impacts of historic preservation. With one of the highest proportions of historic properties nationwide (20% of property owners), the District has not had a comparable study.

For effective planning, it is crucial to measure the impacts that historic districts have on the economic health of the city, on the social fabric of neighborhoods, and on the District's efforts to create a racially equitable city.

To that end, DCPL is pleased to have entered into a cooperative agreement with the Office of Planning to produce a Historic Preservation Impact Report for the District of Columbia. The study is centered around equity, particularly racial equity, resilience, and affordability, and will provide essential new data and analysis and serve as a launch pad for further public engagement centered around the preparation of the Comprehensive Plan.

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 and its citizens. We look forward to sharing the findings of this report with the DC Council and the public.

Thank you for your time, and I welcome any questions you may have.