

HISTORIC DISTRICTS COALITION

Testimony for the
Oversight Hearing by the Council of the District of Columbia's
Committee on Libraries, Parks, Recreation, and Planning
On the Office of Planning and Historic Preservation Office

Thursday, February 9, 2012, 10:00 a.m.

Room 412, John A. Wilson Building

1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20004

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and committee members. My name is Loretta Neumann, and I am here representing the Historic Districts Coalition to provide performance commentary on the Office of Planning and in particular the Historic Preservation Office which functions as part of it.

The Historic Districts Coalition (HDC) is an informal organization made up of representatives of neighborhood historic districts and individuals from neighborhoods considering whether to seek historic district status. Formed in the 1990s, HDC has worked to develop an independent voice on historic preservation issues and concerns shared by the District of Columbia's neighborhood preservation communities.

HDC believes that on balance, the performance of the Historic Preservation Office (HPO) and related activities of the Office of Planning continued at a very acceptable level during the past year both behind the scenes and in public actions. We also have some continuing concerns with a few examples to make this point:

STAFFING

- HDC commends the fact that HPO is once again at full staffing or soon will be. Its staff architect position was filled, and a recent hire will soon fill a vacant preservation specialist position. These important actions occurred because Office of Planning Director Harriet Tregoning, Deputy Director for Historic Preservation and Development Review Jennifer Steingasser, and HPO Chief David Maloney worked together to define and balance needs on an office-wide basis. HDC commends these individuals for their past and continuing efforts coordinating intra-office actions, and their work to ensure that historic preservation as a discipline is integrated in citywide planning.
- HDC also thanks the DC Council for ensuring the availability of funds for these actions and the Historic Preservation Office overall.
- HPO's professional staff, with both geographic and other responsibilities, continues to function well, and they remain a positive, public face of preservation for many individuals and neighborhoods.

- Other HPO staffers may be less visible, but they, too, contribute significantly to the office's image: the office receptionist who daily greets visitors and gets them steered in the proper direction; Patsy Fletcher for her work with individual neighborhoods which helps inform about historic preservation and thus establishes baselines for possible future preservation-related activities; and Bruce Yarnall, whose important and timely administrative work keeps us all informed.
- Preservation Inspectors Toni Cherry and Keith Lambert have responsibilities that make them not always welcomed visitors by owners of some historic properties. However, the inspectors' roles in preventing damage to historic properties are extremely important. HDC believes that overall they and other senior staff try to balance property owners' aims and preservation organizations' responsibilities to maintain the physical fabric that makes historic neighborhoods special. HDC wishes to see timely renewed outreach efforts by these officials to all parties in order to ensure that contentious neighborhood preservation issues are resolved as quickly as possible.

GUIDELINES

- HPO has sought community input for its revised window guidelines which were subsequently adopted by the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB) this past year. When replacements are necessary, these new guidelines continue to ensure that they generally replicate the profile and appearance of the originals, while offering property owners a range of material choices which, in many cases, last longer than wood.
- Continuing its guidelines series, HPO recently circulated for comments its draft of *Design Guidelines for Utility Meters*. With buildings of all sizes in historic districts being converted to multiple residences or uses, new, larger meter boxes continue to be installed on front facades. These new guidelines inform property owners about possible ways to mitigate meter appearances and offer resources to contact for assistance. These guidelines are on the HPRB February agenda for initial review. We also understand that guidelines for door repair and replacement, and for roof repair and alteration are being drafted.
- Guidelines on paper are a first step to help protect the appearance of our historic neighborhoods, but they are only as good as measures taken by staff to enforce them, and lack of proper enforcement can result in unintended precedent-setting actions that can adversely affect the historic character of nearby properties, the overall character for which an historic district was designated, and indeed historic districts citywide. HDC looks for increased attention to this area during the coming year.

DEMOLITION BY NEGLECT

- Demolition by neglect, whereby an owner allows a property to substantially deteriorate from lack of maintenance, is one of the most serious issues affecting historic properties in DC. It has affected properties in historic districts all over the city, including Anacostia, Mount Pleasant, and Takoma.

- As amended in 2006, the DC Historic Preservation Act places an affirmative duty on owners to preserve historic properties against decay, deterioration, and structural defects and to correct conditions that would compromise an historic building's long-term integrity. It also authorizes the Mayor, after determining that a building is threatened by demolition by neglect and obtaining a court order, to require the owner to repair defects that threaten the building or take the necessary action itself at cost to the owner.
- To date, nearly 6 years later and despite the pleas of preservation groups throughout the city, HPO has still not promulgated regulations to implement these provisions. We understand that the HPO plans to have a final draft of the regulations by September 30, 2012. By that we hope they mean to take the draft regulations to the HPRB in September for final review. To meet that timeframe, we urge HPO to work with us and other concerned preservation organizations to help draft proposed new regulations that could be circulated for review by historic districts and all other interested parties later this spring or early summer.
- We acknowledge that HPO has worked to use other existing regulations, such as the blighted property law or the property maintenance provisions of the DC Building Code as interim shortstop measures. There have been some success stories with this approach, namely the saving of a badly deteriorated property at 16th and T streets, NW, and two cases in Anacostia, where administrative measures succeeded. However, HDC believes specific regulations to support the demolition by neglect provisions of our Historic Preservation Act are essential and will give the HPO additional tools to combat this situation. It's now time to give the amended law the strength it was meant to have.

WEBSITE

- HDC compliments the HPO on its redesigned website and will be offering a few suggestions for consideration that we believe may improve it.

HPRB

- From recent newspaper reporting, Mr. Chairman, HDC knows that you and your committee understand the importance of an HPRB whose members serve in non-expired terms. We thank you for the speedy review of recent nominees Maria Casserella-Cummingham and Nancy L. Pryor Metzger, and we look forward to similar attention on the latest group of nominees from Mayor Gray.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment. This statement is supported by the following:

Capitol Hill Restoration Society, Beth Pursell, President
Dupont Circle Conservancy, Rauzia Ally, President
Foggy Bottom Historic District Conservancy, Thomas Bower, President
Citizens Association of Georgetown, Jennifer Altemus, President
Historic Takoma, Inc., Diana Kohn, President
Historic Mount Pleasant, Fay Armstrong, President