

# The Committee of 100 on the Federal City



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September 9, 2013

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George Clark, Esq., Emeritus

945 G Street, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20001

202.681.0225

[info@committeeof100.net](mailto:info@committeeof100.net)

The Honorable Vincent C. Gray  
Mayor, District of Columbia  
Wilson Building  
Washington, D.C.

**Re: D.C. Recommendation on the Height of Buildings Act Master Plan Study**

Dear Mayor Gray,

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City has reviewed the studies and information collected as part of the Height of Buildings Act Master Plan Study conducted jointly by the National Capital Planning Commission and the D.C. Office of Planning. In addition Committee members have participated in the spring and summer series of public presentations and discussion. We have concluded that no further action on any of the proposed approaches to change the Act is warranted. Indeed, the modeling studies, in particular, reaffirm the immense positive effect of the 1910 Height of Buildings Act on the iconic image and historic development of the District of Columbia. Importantly, these images also provide clear evidence that diminished view sheds to the L'Enfant City and federal monuments and landmarks would result from weakening the height maximums.

I have attached the testimony of Laura Richards, former chair and current trustee of the Committee of 100, to the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Government Operations and Reform on July 19, 2012. Her remarks on behalf of the Committee of 100 are as relevant today, after the benefit of the Height of Buildings Act Master Plan Study, as they were a year ago. There are three areas, however, that should be amplified.

First, the study failed to identify a need that might explain why changes to the height maximums should be discussed. When asked to provide a reason for pursuing the study, the Office of Planning representatives consistently stated that the city had not requested the study and that it was being conducted at the request of U.S. Representative Darrell Issa. The lack of an articulated need leads us to believe that the study outlines solutions searching for a problem. This approach would be less disturbing if we weren't discussing a 100 year old law that has complemented the L'Enfant Plan and the McMillan Plan in creating our dynamic and widely admired city.

In addition, the absence of principles that will guide the District's evaluation of the Height of Buildings Act is in contrast to the announced federal principles that form the bright line of the National Capital Planning Commission's review. City residents have

no information on what aspects of our city affected by the Height of Buildings Act, such as the horizontal skyline and the view sheds, are valued by your administration and how those values will be applied to your analysis and development of recommendations.

Second, The Committee of 100 supports the continued growth of the District of Columbia as a means to create vibrancy, inclusion, opportunity, and fiscal health. With good public policies and judicious land use planning, we can maintain a steady growth pattern, welcome new residents, and better address unemployment and poverty. The District has underutilized land and undeveloped parcels that can be creatively planned to meet the city's needs, including provision of widely varied housing types at different levels of affordability. The city can achieve its growth and development goals without sacrificing its iconic skyline—one of the city's greatest assets.

Third, The Committee of 100 supports full and sustainable employment for all District residents. Unemployment in the District of Columbia is at an intolerably high level, but the solution cannot be found in weakening the height limits, just as the Height of Buildings Act is not the cause of our high unemployment levels. The city has been experiencing a protracted and noted building boom and a period of overall job growth that has resulted in greater employment opportunities, yet there has not been a significant change in D.C. unemployment rates. There is no evidence that weakening the Height of Buildings Act is linked to a sustainable improvement in the reduction of unemployment.

The reasons cited for the original passage of the 1910 Height of Buildings Act—reasons of health and well-being—included the provision of life safety and security for building occupants and the guarantee of ample and appropriate light, air and ventilation to city streets, public areas and adjacent properties. Those reasons are as pertinent today as they were in 1910. As noted by Ms. Richards in her testimony: "The Height Act was debated vigorously during its centennial year and no groundswell of public support developed for its repeal. Removing the limit was rejected on urban planning, social policy, historic and aesthetic grounds, with the majority of residents and businesses recognizing that Washington's charm and character stem in significant part from its scale." (p. 3)

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City strongly urges you to convey to the National Capital Planning Commission and Representative Issa your conclusion that the Height of Buildings Act provisions are working to the District's benefit and that the study produced no new opportunities to improve the Act.

Sincerely,



Nancy J. MacWood  
Chair, Committee of 100 on the Federal City