



## **National Capital Planning Commission Special Meeting**

### **Hearing on Executive Director's Recommendation, Height Master Plan for Washington, DC**

#### **Testimony of Nancy J. MacWood Chair, The Committee of 100 on the Federal City**

**November 19, 2013**

The Committee of 100 has historically supported the Height Act, which has provided a height framework for implementing the L'Enfant and McMillan Plans and has contributed significantly to creating our grand capital city. Until today the title of this hearing would be readily understood since "Height Master Plan for Washington, DC" does not suggest that there only some parts of Washington that need height protections. But the EDR before you would irrevocably divide the city into protected and unprotected, and would result in visual documentation of the action you may approve today.

The whole of Washington was built with a singular aesthetic vision. Streets are oriented east and west and broad avenues are planned to frame views and accommodate a natural topography and a scale of building that avoids stark differences and ensures a good human experience with the built environment. This isn't a whimsical design but one that originated with George Washington and has been the guiding template to demonstrate our national principles through design. No other city has shared our high aspirations or had our success. Your vote today will decide if you intend to continue the legacy.

The NCPC EDR continues one aspect of the legacy in Recommendation 1 by ensuring the prominence of federal landmarks and monuments and prohibiting private building from damaging the L'Enfant City. The Committee of 100 strongly supports the EDR in this regard.

But we think the goal of protecting this part of the city will fall short if its form no longer has meaning within the context of the city that frames it.

The EDR states emphatically that the Height Act should not be eliminated outside the L'Enfant City in Recommendation 2, but then proceeds to recommend that it be eliminated. It's clear that no solid data and analysis were presented to change the application of the Height Act outside the L'Enfant City. The only reason offered in the EDR for removing more than 100 years of height protection is the need for better long-range planning in the capital city. How do you make the leap that eliminating our protections would motivate participatory and vigorous, data-driven comprehensive planning? Hasn't it been demonstrated to you that this is exactly what we are lacking? You should not comfort yourself that all will be well and somehow local systems that do not work as presented on paper will magically work as you hope they will. If you vote today to eliminate height protections outside the L'Enfant City you must understand that you are endorsing spot zoning and haphazard planning.

The substance of the EDR has been overshadowed by a sense that there must be consensus between NCPC and the Office of Planning. Often compromise is a worthy goal, but sometimes it leads to detrimental concessions. The EDR displays a formidable conflict in not wanting to give free rein to adding height and density outside the L'Enfant City, but needing to concede something to the Office of Planning. Why? They couldn't make their case.

The EDR recommendation is not based on solving a problem; in fact, it acknowledges that there really isn't a problem that requires a solution. The assumed need to compromise led to an artificial intellectual dilemma. Should this federal law only protect the parts of the city that have the iconic symbols of our democracy or should it continue to protect the entire capital city? That is not a weighty issue and it's answered at the beginning of the EDR when it is stated in clear terms that the federal government has "primary stewardship in the form of the nation's capital." The entire city contributes to that form and not just a few blocks near the White House or Capitol.

It is enticing to avoid controversy by fashioning an analysis that emphasizes process. But is process really what this is about? The EDR is not premised on any confidence or trust that the recommendation will result in a good process that leads to good decisions and effective controls.

You know that DC residents don't want this change. None of us want to be the generation that enshrined the L'Enfant City as a Disneyland-type attraction that is surrounded by a city that once shared its form. We urge you to find that Washington is one city with a common form and a common story. We urge the rejection of Recommendation 2 and the approval of the other recommendations.

