

# The 1910 Height Act

*The state of the conversation-Where will  
we go from here?*

Committee of 100 Height Act Centennial Celebration  
October 19, 2010

The Cairo – the building that started it all

Standing at 14 stories and 164 feet, the Cairo, at 1615 Q Street NW, is Washington's tallest residential building.

Designed by Thomas Franklin Schneider and completed in 1894, the building's height created an uproar that resulted in passage of the 1910 Height Act (after other short-lived regulatory initiatives). The Cairo's Egyptian theme is executed through Moorish and Romanesque Revival features.







## 2006 –*Post* writer pans the Height Act

- Promotes an “understated vision of urbanity” dating back to Jefferson
- Fosters suburban sprawl, “boxifies” architecture and “deadens” downtown
- Inflates rents and deflate taxes
- Limits affordable housing; creates traffic jams
- Helps keep Washington a second-tier city
  - *Washington Post*’s Michael Grunwald

## 2007 DCBIA Conference—is the Height Act relevant today?

- Don Hawkins: No need for more height – DC has not used up land available for development
- Then-C100 Chair called the “requisite nay-sayer” speaking for those imbued with “reverence” for L'Enfant's vision
- Height Act stymies development
- Consider building up to the maximum 160 foot-limit in commercial zones; override street width guide

# 2008 Conference—multiple views

- Thomas Luebke, Fine Arts Commission – skyline is a “national symbol,” DC is unique
- Marcel Acosta, NCPC – DC streets welcome pedestrians, provide sunlight, not like NY
- Christopher Leinberger, Brookings – without more room, only the wealthiest businesses and residents can live here
- Ellen McCarthy, planner – without the height limit, DC would have “more graceful and more slender buildings”

# 2010—Larry Beasley for the NCPC

Good tall buildings make a city magical

- More sustainability through density and mixed uses
- More space to achieve a more complicated building program
- Inspire great architecture and allow beautiful views

*But....*



- The Height Act fundamentally shaped the city – a symbolic capital with two centuries of history
- DC allows our national symbols and grand ceremonial spaces to dominate the city
- “In North American culture when we get a little bored by something we just change it. That is a risky thing to do”





# Too much of a good thing?

**A treasured national space**



**From C100' s mission statement**

C100 “celebrates the city's unique role as both the home of the District's citizens and the capital of our nation”



# Still a shared vision?

