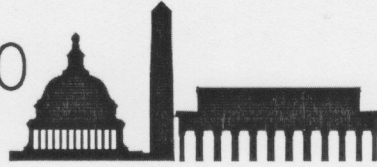


The Committee of 100

on the Federal City



August 24, 2020

Dear Mayor Bowser, Chairman Mendelson, and Members of the Council

On May 15, over three months ago, The Committee of 100 ("C100") wrote to urge the DC Council to return the Office of Planning's draft amendments to the Comprehensive Plan (the "Plan") to the Office of Planning ("OP") so that the draft can be reconsidered in light of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We said then that the pandemic will likely impact population growth, employment and revenue. Given that it is now clear that life will not quickly return to normal, and in fact is likely to be changed forever, we repeat our previous request that the draft Plan be re-evaluated. Consider the following:

* OP's draft Plan is based on the assumption that the District will experience "a greater pace of growth."

* According to the Office of the Chief Financial Officer (OCFO), the District population grew by only 4,202 persons in 2019, the smallest increase in 12 years, and most of that was a natural increase resulting from the excess of births over deaths -- 3,758. The total net increase in the adult population was only 398. In-migration into the City has declined every year since 2012. Net out-migration is now a real possibility.

* After six months, it is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic will have a long-term impact. After six months, the pandemic has demonstrated that many workers and their employers have become accustomed to teleworking, and that many DC jobs are amenable to telework. This shift to working from home will affect the need for additional office space in the future. The vacancy rate in commercial office space is already at a record level, according to the Washington Business Journal. We expect this trend to continue. Now may be the time for planners to consider facilitating the conversion of office buildings into residences. Transportation patterns will also shift. One can expect reduced mass transit to the downtown core. While these developments, and their impact on planning, need to be better understood, it does seem that fundamental shifts in work and transportation are occurring. These changes are not necessarily bad. We all benefit, for example, from reduced congestion.

* While we expect that tourism will eventually return, business travel is likely to be curtailed. Given that many have grown accustomed to Zoom meetings, why take a day or two to fly to DC for a 2-hour meeting.

* OP's draft Plan is built on the assumption that more housing is needed. The

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Mayor in fact sees the need for 36,000 new homes by 2025. Given that growth has stalled, or maybe reversed, C100 questions whether the draft Comprehensive Plan should be grounded on the need for all these new homes.

Will there be sufficient demand for market-rate and luxury housing to take up the added supply that the Plan envisions? C100 does agree that there is a need for more affordable housing. However, the proposals in the draft Comprehensive Plan do not begin to scratch the surface on what is needed.

* It is clear that the virus is more easily spread in dense environments. The City has seen an explosion of high rise buildings with smaller residential units. There needs to be an adjustment in both residential units and work space to minimize the spread of this virus and further threats.

Instead of the massive re-write reflected in the draft Plan, we recommend that the Office of Planning shelve the current, outdated draft and focus instead on a smaller set of amendments that focus on current needs:

* Support for small businesses. While we expect larger DC businesses will be able to weather the pandemic, many small businesses cannot (a number have already permanently closed).

* Expansion of broadband throughout the City, so residents and students can work and learn from home.

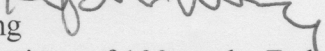
* Increased affordable housing.

* Environmental justice.

* Employment opportunities.

Given current uncertainties, now is not the time to charge ahead with a Plan whose vision is obscured. Rather than working on a plan for the next 20 years, the Mayor and the Council should be focused on a Plan and related legislation that addresses current problems.

Thank you,


Kirby Vining
Chair, Committee of 100 on the Federal City