

# The Committee of 100

on the Federal City



April 23, 20024

## Committee of 100's Statement for the Committee of the Whole Hearing Concerning the Proposed 2025 Budget for the Office of Planning and Office of Zoning

Dear Chair Mendelson and Members of the Committee of the Whole

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City is pleased to submit this testimony concerning the proposed FY 2025 budget for the Office of Planning (OP) and the Office of Zoning (OZ).

The Mayor is proposing a 1.9 percent increase to the OZ's \$4 million budget, which allows for a marginal increase in personnel costs with no new staff and no layoffs. The OP's \$15.5 million budget represents a \$1.6 million (11.6 percent) from this year's approved budget.

In a year of belt-tightening, the Council should closely review the proposed increase. We draw your attention in particular to the \$2 million line item in OP's budget for "Streets for People" grants – a program that allocates funds to downtown and near-downtown business improvement districts for street festivals and similar activities. This money could be spent better elsewhere.

The line item is described as a "one-time" cost, although Streets for People grants totaling \$2.8 million were first awarded in 2022 and \$650,000 in grants were awarded in 2023. This is another instance of Downtown funding receiving priority while social services and neighborhood-based activities face cuts. Within OP, the budget for neighborhood planning is proposed to be cut by \$800,000. In addition, for at least the past three years, C100 has asked for more and better use of planning technology such as CityEngine that makes planning more accessible and transparent to the public.

With respect to zoning, C100 again asks the Council to move toward the goal of a truly independent Zoning Commission by separating OP's role as expert advisor to the Commission from its primary duty of executing the Mayor's planning and economic development goals. The Commission will never be truly independent if it must rely for expert planning guidance on the same individuals who may have spent several years shaping a project.

Independence may be achieved at no additional cost by reallocating OP funds and transferring OP staff to the OZ. In similar action, the Zoning Secretariat was moved from OP to the newly created OZ in 1990. Also, since late 2021, the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) Land Use Section has operated as an advocacy unit for OAG policies and its former function as legal advisor to the OZ now operates from inside the OZ.

The need for independent planning advice has become increasingly urgent as the OP continues the Mayor's policy of citywide upzoning, maximizing heights and densities in one neighborhood after another pursuant to new flexibility granted in the 2021 amendments to the Comprehensive Plan. The need for an independent voice was particularly apparent in case 23-02, 1617 U Street, where OP proposed a map amendment for an entire square block of 100 foot-plus heights. Faced with massive community pushback, OP may have dialed back its recommendations part way through the case; hearings have concluded and a decision is pending.

Neutral advice also is needed in the face of rising evidence that OP's policy of maximizing density everywhere is not working and may actually impede alternative approaches. For instance, the McMillan Reservoir site thus far has not attracted the large commercial tenants intended to anchor it; the site now consists of a two-block long ditch. The Armed Forces Retirement Home abandoned altogether the high-density, mixed-use development intended for that site.

Thank you.

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