

“The Equation of Height and Density in the Form and Economy of Washington, D.C. in the 21st Century”

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We are here tonight to talk about the future of the prevailing height limits here in Washington. You are in the middle of what I see as historic discussions about this throughout this community and among the governments and organizations that have planning responsibilities for the future of the capital and I hope I can make a useful contribution to those discussions.

I’m happy to follow the very informative recent Atherton Lecture by Witold Rybezynski on this topic because he gave such a full history of urban building heights and the evolution of the Height Act here in Washington, which is a good foundation for my remarks. And I was also happy to see my friend Chris Leinberger of the Brookings Institute weigh in on the topic as well. But more than anything, I am appreciative to the National Capital Planning Commission of Washington for giving me this opportunity to address this issue because this city is and always has been a beloved and special place for me.

Let me start by singing the praises of tall buildings. After all, that is why I have been invited here today. My city, Vancouver, in Canada, has explored all aspects of tall buildings over the last fifty years and has brought the building of tall buildings to a high science (no pun intended) over the last 25 years through a combination of private entrepreneurial creativity and public policy guidance year after year after year. As much as anything, we’ve been able to actually build hundreds of tall buildings, whole areas in fact, especially in our inner city, so our experience is not theoretical, it is practical, on the ground.

We have found the magic of tall buildings that is making our city very special.

For example, we have realized that tall buildings allow our city to move directly toward a more sustainable urbanism because they facilitate the two factors of sustainability that are so vital in cities: density and mixed use; these being the factors that create the essential qualities of the sustainable city, proximity and diversity. I’m sure most people here know the score on this. You know that getting people out of their cars is the key push for urban environmental compatibility. You know that getting people of different life experience closer together motivates a more responsible social agenda. You know that bringing consumers and products face-to-face facilitates economic health. I’m simplifying for effect here but you know exactly what I am talking about.

Now, I’m certainly not saying that you can’t achieve this in smaller, more modestly scaled buildings – surely with strong intent you can do so. But it simply seems easier with tall buildings because you have more space in all directions to work with to achieve a more complicated building program. Now, of course for the technical people in the room, I have to put a caveat on

all this. In talking about tall buildings, I am not necessarily talking about unendingly tall buildings. We know at a certain point massive buildings start to draw negatively on the environmental equation, primarily because of energy performance, and they start to actually create isolation, and they become very expensive to service and manage. They become a liability. But let there be no doubt, you can achieve significant height before all that drama starts to unfold.

In Vancouver, we have also found tall buildings can be expressive and beautiful. We have found that they have drama and make a statement that touches the heartstrings of lots of people, especially if they are done carefully. We have found that in a cluster, or dare I say a constellation because the actual composition of the cluster is important, they can signal important places and can bring a city in line with a dramatic landscape like we enjoy in Vancouver's mountainous context. There is something bold and definitive about tall buildings that some people always seem to have a hankering for in their cities.

We have discovered the tool that height represents to leverage other public goods that people need in a great city but that government budgets find hard to fund. Coupled with a carefully calibrated zoning system of bonuses and incentives, height with density has leveraged better design and every quality amenity that we could possibly think of for our city.

And finally we have found that tall buildings are quite popular with users because they let people get up to the wonderful views that are always there for our enjoyment if we can just get up to the point where they start to become expansive. Of course, the more that you have to look at in your setting that is special, the more this becomes important and valuable.

In my city, for example, the actual market value of floor space, whether commercial leased space or market condos, is significantly higher with every floor of distance from the ground and away from the cacophony and view blockage that one generally finds near the ground. I'm not necessarily sure this would be true in Las Vegas. But in Vancouver, consumers spend a lot of time deciding exactly how high they not only wish to live in but also wish to invest in, based upon what is happening around them and what views are available. And there are clever ways to maximize such potential.

So as our world continues to urbanize and more and more people live in cities, the tall building is here to stay – like it or not. There is no nostalgia that can cause that to change. The benefits are there for all to see and take advantage of if we handle the situation correctly.

But handling the situation correctly is very important. Our Vancouver experience has taught us something else about tall buildings. You can do them well or you can do them poorly. They can be impactful and oppressive or they can be in harmony with one another and other shorter buildings around them and with people as they experience these buildings. The shape and design of the building becomes absolutely of pivotal implication to their success or failure. Let me give you some flavour of what I mean.

You can think of a tall building as similar to a classical column – with a base, a shaft and a capital or top. We have found that the building design must address all three of these aspects, although most modern buildings do not do so. In Vancouver we mass a podium base with one set of dynamics, a tower shaft with other considerations and a cap condition for yet another set of reasons. You have to be careful as heights go up that you do not just extrude the lower scale floorplates to higher and higher buildings.

At some point, which will be differently defined in each city by the inclination of their citizens about what is a comfortable scale, a very tall undifferentiated building becomes very overbearing. There are thousands of examples out there to prove this point perhaps partly because architects have tended to design tall buildings as objects rather than as facilitators of experience. In any event, our approach to this in Vancouver has been seen as unique enough as a pervasive style that it has even been given an epithet – “Vancouverism.” So let me tell you about Vancouverism because I think it is essential for you to think in this way if you do decide to explore taller buildings here in Washington.

The base of a tall building needs to be designed with its own integrity. The height of podium massing is generally set by the ambient historic scale of the setting and the experiential tolerances of citizens. The specific architecture picks up on the detailing of buildings around it. And the whole ensemble is conceived to give a gentle humanism to the building and to let the building play a role among nearby buildings in shaping public space and street character. This is the area to achieve the hospitality of the building and all the “new urbanist” values that we all know are so important, even with the most cutting edge architectural expression; things like “eyes and ears on the street,” permeability of the facade, and interest for the pedestrian.

So, in Vancouver, at the base level we push the massing proud to the street (very similarly to Washington’s streetwall buildings), we do not tolerate blank walls, we bring doors and windows and stoops and almost any interesting detail down to eye level, and we require weather protection. In residential settings, we try to truly domesticate the streetscape with rowhousing or push for shophouses that can provide a local retail frontage. In commercial settings we want maximum glazing that can make the building transparent with fascinating vistas and we want active uses at grade or we press for as much retail as the market can bear. The point is that the base is where you experience the building so we want it to be very engaging, supportive and “gently giving” rather than harsh or brutal and awesomely out of scale.

The tower we see as another matter. Generally we set a tower back from the property line and the cornice line of the podium base to moderate its impacts so, from the street, it almost floats out of one’s consciousness. Then we want the tower massing to be slim, and more and more so as it gets taller. A rule of thumb is that residential tower floorplates be kept below 7000 sq. ft. and taller commercial tower floorplates be kept below about 15,000 sq. ft. There is a certain proportion of tower height-to-bulk that creates an elegant form and profile.

Then, we tend to cluster the buildings in a composition that makes a statement but more importantly allows maximum view penetration around buildings and through a stand of buildings. Generally, between towers we require a minimum separation of 80 ft., but the more

the better, to facilitate those views and to also secure an acceptable level of privacy between tower occupants.

The top or cap is a matter of skyline expression. In essence we have been trying to avoid the humdrum of all flat-topped buildings and we want it to be a place for a little architectural fun. At the same time, we've tried to avoid this becoming too clownish as you see in some cities, dare I say in Shanghai or Dubai for example, so the relationships among the tops of nearby towers become quite important, even though the subjective quality of design performance sometimes makes this hard to adjudicate.

So that is "Vancouverism" or the Vancouver tall building model in its essential points and I hope it might be helpful if and when you start considering any taller buildings here in Washington.

But, you know, all my praise of tall buildings and all my detailed commentary of how to best do tall buildings may be missing the point of what you are really struggling with here in Washington. Is the debate about the height of buildings and the future of the height limit in its essential nature about the shape of buildings and the management of building scale? I think not.

I think the debate is really about the personality of your city – and this is where building height management is very different from building height limits. In many places in the world people are looking at the benefits and costs of overall height limits related to the image of the city. For example, I've just dealt with this in a big way in the planning of a very far away city in my work for the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, but I will come back to that a little later.

To start this discussion, we can ask a fundamental question. What should motivate a cityscape? Should the cityscape just be the random result of the economic activity of a city, driven by investor opportunity, and more than that, can the manipulation of heights be used to motivate that economic activity? Needless to say, for most North American cities and most newer cities around the world, this has been the case. You can look at the civic profile and generally discern the economic story of that city. And where that is the case, then the logic can be simple: let go of height limits and let the technology and the financial power of society set the tower heights, without limits, for maximum economic effort and maximum economic gain.

New York and Hong Kong and, until a very short time ago, I would have added Dubai come easily to mind and the reason we remember these particular cities is that they have been the most powerful of the powerful so their very unmitigated scale have actually made them unique with a special symbolism. Unfortunately we cannot say the same thing for hundreds of other such cities because, in the end, they could only go so far and so their scale of buildings could only go so far and the result, unhappily, is that their skylines look more or less like one another; and, in the end, they are forgettable.

In contrast, can the cityscape be deliberately structured to do something else or say something else; can it be shaped for a larger purpose? This might not make sense in the modern rational world of the development business in most cities but if a city sees itself as somehow very special or in need of some kind of specific "statement" and if it sees itself as actually capable of reining

in the freeform economic process for the purpose of explicit civic form, then, all of a sudden, we have a very interesting question. And when you include into that thinking that the city might be a capital city or a holy city or a city that is in some measure symbolic, then I hope the question becomes a practical consideration. And, of course, that is the case with Washington.

Again, my little city of Vancouver might offer a line of thinking relevant to Washington. We're not a capital city or a holy city or, generally in any way really very special, except that about 25 years ago we realized that our economic future rested on tourism and the ideas industries and the in-migration of wealth and to be competitive, we had to be very attractive and very liveable. We had to design it, especially in height density and scale, more with the end-user in mind.

We pursued many paths in that aspiration and the resulting city is liveable and attractive and it is making an economic future for us – and that's another story. But as a part of that we did ask ourselves some unique questions about our skyline. As a part of being liveable, we asked ourselves if our city should protect important public views regardless of the economic implications for individual building projects. And, as a part of being attractive, we asked ourselves if our city should explicitly shape our skyline as a work of art, again regardless of the economic implications for individual building projects. What would end-users prefer?

In both cases, we mounted huge public discussions, involving thousands of our citizens and all the artistry and computer wizardry we could muster to lay out the options – and we discovered that our citizens were strongly in the affirmative; they wanted us to make the city anew. They wanted the symbolism and they wanted the collective advantages and they wanted the artfulness as a part of the presentation of their city to the world and so we put strong policies in place.

I don't agree with Witold Rybezynski's contention that you cannot do this, that is to say, differentiate the heights of buildings for urban design purposes; North American cities have been doing this consistently for at least half a century. We have an overlay of varying height limits in our inner city to protect view corridors that has sculpted the skyline for many years and remains just as popular today as when it was first implemented – I know that because it has just been reviewed with the public. We have an overlay of extra height opportunities, varying the limits, for pure artistic purposes, tied to the provision of major public amenities and qualities, that has started to give a specific artful echo of the skyline with the mountain backdrop and to denote the pre-eminence of place of our CBD in our otherwise huge mega-region.

So what might this all mean for Washington? You're certainly not starting from scratch. It is hard to believe that for 100 years, you have had a clear and distinct height policy – in fact a very simply height limit – and it has already fundamentally shaped your city. I've heard this was originally about safety but I think we all see that it is first and foremost about symbolism. Your achievement at the symbolic level is profound.

So as you now consider the future of the height limits, I hope you will start with several cues from Vancouver. First, we discovered that the economic performance of any one project was not affected in a meaningful way by the municipality's manipulation of heights. Land values simply adjusted to the allowances and opportunities and the economic engine has kept right on working.

Don't fret too much about the economic reactions, the investor reactions – I'll come back to this in a minute.

Second, we discovered we could manage heights at a fine grain. The political system was robust enough to do that, even though it is a typical pluralistic democracy just like you have here. Don't worry about the political viability since you've already shown that through a hundred years of diverse politics, you have held the system together extraordinarily well.

Third, we learned that it is a good idea to check all of this first with the public in a major outreach because everything we've had to do depended absolutely upon the strength and breadth of their support. So, do worry about the attitude of your citizens as end-users and make sure you bend over backward to help them understand the implications of any change and that you come to well understand their preferences on this. In the final analysis, this is not an academic matter, it is a populist judgement.

Now, before I go into my thoughts about changes to the height limits in Washington, I want to go a little deeper into the economic questions that flow around this issue.

Let me remind you, first, that an increase in height does not necessarily represent an increase in development capacity. For example, this building is about the same density as this building. And to the extent this is true, manipulating heights only, to a large extent, will not really have much of an effect on the economics of a development or the economic climate of the city. That's why, for example, you can do an equally effective strategy for transit-oriented clustering of dense development in both a high scale and a lower scale format with equal success. Adjusting heights in large measure, without touching densities, is really just a design question of putting the same development allowance in one form or another. So as you adjust heights, if you decide to do so, you will also have to be mindful to adjust densities in a parallel way for the economic implications to come into play.

With that proviso in mind, I have nonetheless heard it said that the existing height rules limit the economic performance of the city. Well, this is an argument that I would be a little sceptical about. There are two ways to look at the economics – individual and community wide. You can talk about the economic value of one particular project or you can talk about the overall economic value of the whole city.

Yes, looking at it from the individual developer angle, the conclusion is clear: the more you open up heights and add the densities with that, the more economic opportunity you can create for the developer if you play your cards right. I put that last proviso on because if you just increase what can be built on a site, then the developer will not benefit as much as the existing landowner, who, as we all know, is the single biggest speculator in the land development scene. If you unilaterally increase a development allowance, an existing landowner will see his land as more valuable and, without doing anything, claim most of that value. So as you increase any allowance, I am a big proponent of making it conditional so that only the developer can exploit it and therefore must pay slightly less for the land so he can afford to meet the condition of the allowance – whether that condition relates to design of some particular amenity.

But, in explaining this, I digress. The bottom line at an individual investor perspective is simple: more opportunity creates more profit. Heights with density create more economic opportunity, although the way the land market works tends to take the initial big kick out of this pretty fast.

But is that what you want this discussion to be all about? Isn't the real issue about collective or community-wide value? Things look quite different from this perspective. I think your existing height rules have created disproportionately higher community value, on a per square foot basis, compared to square foot values in a typical city elsewhere, from two angles.

On the one hand, your city's very uniqueness makes it inherently more valuable than other places. On the other hand, your city's comfortable scale makes it more attractive to more people and therefore more valuable while being less impactful on others and therefore less diminishing of their value. The resulting wealth created or preserved by the height limit is in fact being enjoyed by all landowners at all times and the composite value, I would argue, is greater than what it would have been by more variable heights.

For me, the message here, from either aspect of the equation, is not to get too upset one way or the other about this issue of economics. Height changes, unless they are dramatic, are not really going to make too much of a difference in the economic performance of Washington.

From another angle, I've heard it said that some increases in height would allow a program to be implemented to bonus landuses in areas where they are wanted but are not naturally occurring. The case of housing in the core of Washington to create more sustainable mixed use areas has been cited. More density around transit stations has also been cited. Now, I can, in fact, see the merit of this argument. If you allow more height and related density and you designate it for a particular use, then I would expect the market to pick up on that provided there is some genuine demand for the use out there.

Our experience in Vancouver has shown beyond a shadow of a doubt that you can leverage one use by attaching it with the allowance of another use. So I think this is a good strategy. The question is to what scale you wish to push this opportunity. At a modest scale it may have very little impact. At a grander scale the costs might well begin to increasingly outweigh the benefits.

But now let me shift back to the main thrust of today's theme – the pros and cons of Washington's height limits. I've already summarized the benefits of taller buildings so now let me talk about the benefits of limiting taller buildings. I can see that this policy has two major advantages that stand out.

First, in the world economic and social competition among cities there is a strong imperative to make sure your city is more notable and memorable in contrast to other cities around it. Now Washington will definitely differentiate itself from any other city by virtue of being the seat of one of the planet's most powerful nations. But isn't it also true that the ambient height of the capital, because it is simply so vividly different from other cities, also helps? That hundred years of investment in a prevailing height certainly has made the city especially unique and especially appealing.

The second benefit of the height limit is the one you all know about and often talk about: that it allows the national symbols of the capital to stand out and prevail over all other massing of the city. Part of this has to do with keeping the overall heights of context buildings lower than the dramatic dome of the Congress and the spire of the Washington Monument. Perhaps a bigger part of this has to do with creating a coherent frame of walls among many buildings around the grand ceremonial spaces of the capital, such as the National Mall and the White House. A related benefit that may not have been originally thought about 100 years ago is that the resulting development allowance has taken pressure off the historic buildings that express the long continuity of government in the capital.

Both of these objectives have been applied or are now being applied in other cities and their experiences are informative. In the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, for example, we are attempting to put in place right now what you have enjoyed here for a long, long time. In the royal city of Al Ain, which has a wonderful historic ambience and delicate character, we have just proclaimed a height limit of what we call “G+5,” or six stories, because it will increasingly differentiate the city as all the Emirate’s other cities grow and because it emphasizes the historic buildings that are key to the city’s character – the mosque domes and minarets, the turrets of the forts and the expressive palaces. I just hope we can make it work half as well as your height limits have worked.

In Paris and Vienna, the two best examples I know, they have a history just like your own, of a grand streetwall but still modest overall ambient height of buildings in the historic core city that all regular buildings respect, allowing the government, religious and cultural buildings to remain notable. These two cities stand out vividly in anyone’s memory as special places because they are low scale cities – and more so every year as cities around the world become higher and higher scale. I shuttered recently when I heard that there are forces at work in Paris to remove that city’s long-standing height limits for the same reasons you are talking about here. Imagine historic Paris with towers popping up anywhere. It would be a sacrilege.

In contrast, Buenos Aires has gone the other way. Starting with an obvious height maximum that scaled and shaped the major structure of the central city for generations, at some point they let that go and the result is a confusion of their skyline that even the most rigorous of street patterns cannot compensate for. The sad result is that Buenos Aires’ image is now also a confusion and the integrity of historic buildings has often been highly compromised.

And this brings us back to the historic choice you now seem to have before you – and there is a tendency to turn this into a “Hobson’s choice;” having to select from extreme options that offer something appealing but also require you to give up something equally appealing.

If you stay with the historic height limits, you will continue to enjoy the increasing uniqueness of the city among cities and you will more and more reinforce the stature of your government institutions and symbols – but you will seemingly give up the economic stimulus that more height could represent and limit your ability to become more sustainable. If you open up building heights to taller buildings, you will surely enjoy economic benefits, you can tie the benefits to desirable public goods or urban design performance through making the increased height an

incentive or bonus and I have no doubt that you can start to reshape the city for better sustainability as we have done in Vancouver – but you will throw away the uniqueness that has deliberately been put in place in the control of thousands of buildings over a vast 100 years, you could endanger the integrity of your national symbols and you may also put your historic building fabric at risk. Frankly, I really hate “Hobson’s choices.”

And, frankly, I think they are to be strictly avoided. And the intelligent way to do that is through careful and thoughtful planning – through deliberate urban design analysis, that ultimately also reaches out to your citizens for real guidance. Let me tell you what I mean.

I think the first step is to get rid of the polemics and get rid of those extreme choices – just take them off the table, at least for a time, as a frame for analysis and debate. I would suggest that you start with the proposition that random height increases of a drastic nature are not to be entertained. I would suggest that you also start with the proposition that “no change” to the existing height limits is also not going to be entertained – some changes somewhere will be brought to the table.

Now, needless to say, there is a risk involved here and because of the way democratic discussions can spin out of control, it is a somewhat lopsided risk. As the process heats up there will be a tendency to remove any constraints on the discussion, which could move you to the extremes of height flexibility very quickly. It can be a slippery slope. Also, as this occurs and if as a result of it there is speculation on property and land values start to go up, then it will be very hard to put the lid back on Pandora’s Box, which might sacrifice forever the calm heights equilibrium that you have enjoyed for so long. But maybe that risk is worth it. After all, if you do not at least explore a responsible range of options you can never really know if a better solution is out there suitable for another century.

To cut the risk I have just talked about, I think the second step is to set clear boundaries on what simply will not be considered. Here would be the parameters I would set.

First, I would say no height increases in the vicinity of the monumental core of the capital, the grand axis of Washington and any other key focal points, within a prescribed spacious distance of the national symbols. A careful initial urban design analysis of relative massing and view sheds will tell you what that distance needs to be. Now, I’m not talking about a few feet or even blocks of distance here; I’m talking about significant distance – so that there will be absolutely no danger that additional heights will intrude upon the capital experience.

Second, I suggest that no height increases be entertained within the context of historic and character areas. This would have several aspects. It would apply to districts with significant clusters of genuine heritage buildings. It would apply to the delicate, currently coherent edges of the historic public spaces of national interest, the squares and circles that enrich one’s experience of the capital. It would also apply to the streetscapes of the ceremonial or culturally important boulevards of the city. In other words, where history has given you an elegant or characterful building or space, a place clearly beloved by your citizens, just don’t play with the development allowances. Preserve these places as a non-negotiable priority.

Third, I would avoid the geographic high points that would exacerbate the effect of a taller building mass. I am a great proponent that such locations should be left to nature, like they do in Auckland, New Zealand, or to important public edifices where the architecture itself can make the appropriate statement.

Those are three simple parameters that will set a clear “no go” zone that will make the task easier and take the pressure immediately off of properties that don’t need that pressure. Then, having done this, I would next outline the positive directions for height considerations. Again, here are my thoughts.

First, outside the “no go” zone, I would consider very modest height increases that can be shown through explicit design analysis to be perceived only in a very minor way by an average observer from the public realm of the city, essentially from the sidewalk. With the computer technology we now have available, this is no longer a long or arduous task; in fact, it is relatively easy. I’ve heard several ideas that might be easy to put onto play with little impacts.

One is to allow the rooftop appurtenances that are now allowed for decorative or utility use to be built out for occupancy, provided the setbacks from the building edge are strictly observed. Another is to tack on a story here or there on buildings that already sit in a setting of slightly taller buildings, perhaps taking the cue for maximum heights from the buildings on either side. And yet another is to look at areas with prevailing heights significantly below the current limits, but held lower through municipal ordinance, and allow buildings in these areas to edge up. Even in these cases, however, I would set a maximum increase in heights to be considered so as to not set off a frenzy of speculation about candidate sites.

I also think it is worth saying that, as I see this, this opportunity in every case will be only a modest one that will not lead to a meaningful rescaling of a building or an area. The key here is to stay with the parti or basic shape of the building massing that currently exists rather than introducing an alternative massing. You have a streetwall parti that suits the height regime you have in place and it is essential, as a part of modest height increases that, for example, the Vancouver model of the tower podium not be introduced. The result would be jarring. But you have to realize that this option is just a bit of tinkering, “romancing the edges,” and that it will not really create a lot of new development capacity.

Second, I would make it clear from the outset that any height increase that is implemented will be tied to the realization of a clearly defined public objective, the delivery of public goods to be expected from the resulting development. It has been suggested that the quid pro quo of housing in predominantly office areas be identified – and that makes sense. It might be that an area is deficient of a public amenity that equity from the height increase could be used to contribute toward or, if significant enough, to even provide. Now, let me remind you of how this works.

Many of you will know that in development there are two kinds of profit. There is a profit on the actual production of the building product – a percentage per square foot of building that is actually built and sold. Then there is another profit that sometimes comes into play when a

property enjoys unexpected new development rights – it is a windfall profit in additional land value. To make a bonus or incentive work, you have to avoid ever touching the building production profit because, otherwise, no intelligent developer is going to build anything.

To make a bonus or incentive work, you also have to make sure the land value increase stays in the hands of the developer rather than slipping into that of the previous land owner. This is done according to how you structure the law that vests the additional development opportunity. And then, having done that, you can then look for a portion of that unexpected land value to be invested in the public good that the bonus or incentive is trying to achieve.

The point of all this is my simple cue to you from a person that has been putting these schemes together for years: just never specify the increased development opportunity without at the same time specifying the conditional public requirements or you will never see those public requirements.

Now, having said this, I also need to advise you that, except for cases where you are prepared to see a big increase in heights, rather than one or two stories, this opportunity for a bonus may be of only minimal interest to most developers because the economic gain would be very modest and not worth the trouble or extra costs as the design program inevitably becomes more complicated. You definitely need to do a financial “development proforma” analysis to determine when the net extra value of the bonus or incentive really does kick in enough to be genuinely attractive to a typical developer.

Third, I would set a challenge that any height increase must be supported at a predetermined level by those who will be most directly affected by the increase. Of course, I mean primarily the neighbours. While in a democracy it is rare to find total consensus and therefore this is an unreasonable expectation of any public policy, at the same time a solid majority needs to be sanguine with a change like additional heights because the results can sometimes be so harmful in terms of both the utility and value of an adjacent property.

Height increases hit people in two ways – one subtle and one blunt. A subtle impact is that their perception is hit and therefore their intuitive comfort with the building height is more or less affected. A blunt impact is that their use of the building is hit and therefore the practical utility of the building to them is affected – they might lose a view or feel a shadow or give up part of their privacy. So, part of this will involve a good process of general advisement of people of what is being considered. Part of this will be to complete a tangible assessment for people that illustrate for them what the impacts will be, if any. And part of this is clarifying for people what the public amenity benefits will be. I have found that people are tolerant to modest impacts if the community benefits they will enjoy are soundly understood and appreciated.

Then, the final parameter I want to talk about has to do with consideration of height increases that might be more than a reasonable person would call “modest.” This is Chris Leinberger’s proposition. You know what I am talking about: those situations where one or several buildings stand out strongly above all the buildings around them. They “pop up;” you just can’t ignore

them. They are not one or two stories taller than their neighbours; they are significantly taller, maybe twice as tall, as their neighbours or even more.

Should these ever be considered for Washington? Well, here is what would set my attitude about this. As I have already emphasized, on a random basis, even outside the “no go” zone I have talked about before, I would say “no.” Does anyone want tall buildings to go up just anywhere? I do not think Washington wants to find itself in the confusing situation of Buenos Aires. But, on the other hand, there may be a carefully concluded urban design reason that would endorse one or a cluster of taller buildings to achieve a real, direct urban design objective; a conclusion that comes at the end of an articulated urban design analysis and wide public discourse.

For example, using the case of the “Le Defence” development in Paris at the far end of the perspective of the Champs Elysees as an illustration, if you can show that it is desirable to terminate a long perspective of one of Washington’s grand boulevards with a taller building massing, then that might represent a positive opportunity. Or, using that height strategy of Downtown Vancouver as another example, although this Parisian image probably better makes the point, you might want to strongly identify one of the contemporary new town centres outside of the core city with a marker of taller buildings that would sit expressively on the horizon.

Whatever the reasoning, I think the potential opportunities would be few and far between, and the specific options would need to be defined at a technical level before any public debate because the search for such opportunities could set off a firestorm of negative forces on the quality and value of your city. Moreover, I would armature that initial technical analysis with a round of independent peer review because the subtlety of design, coupled with the subtlety of political pressure on even the best local analyst, could cause some inappropriate ideas to float into the agenda.

And, if you do find several of these opportunities for acceptable focal points of significant extra height, I hope that you will take great care in the form and architecture of these buildings and that the Vancouver model, the urbane podium and slim tower and expressive cap profile, will be some inspiration for how such taller buildings are realized on the ground. It would be prudent to adopt suitable design guidelines that are attached as performance expectations to the opportunity for extra height.

Well, over the last few minutes, I’ve tried to describe a rational analytical process with checks and balances to make it manageable. But, before I close, I want to step back and look at the whole picture.

I can tell you from long experience that the kind of careful process that I have described, one that errs on the side of caution, will not yield a huge new opportunity for development that is somehow going to change the development economy of Washington. It will possibly create an array of small opportunities. Although, I have to say, it might not create much opportunity at all if the economics of mixed use hold too high a premium or if the regulatory mechanism lets the increased land value slip over to the initial land owners (as I described before).

And don't think that in some way you are going to open up some mysterious opportunity for better architecture or that this will be a magic bullet for green construction. I think that is a complete myth and a red herring. All over the world, there are splendid buildings and top-rated green buildings at all scales and certainly at the existing scale of Washington. For me, the example of the Athletes' Village for the recent Olympic Games in Vancouver comes to mind. All of its buildings are less than 100 feet tall, they are clearly mid-rise buildings, but the project was recently awarded a LEED Platinum rating, which is the best you can get, and the architecture is just amazing. With a good architect, these issues simply become irrelevant.

So I think you might want to carefully consider up front, in the final analysis, if it is really worth all the trouble and effort to do some kind of comprehensive review of your height regulations. One benefit that will come from the review is a strong confirmation of explicit public policy that puts the issue to bed for another generation or more – and that is good. Another benefit will be a more fine-grained calibration of heights, picking up on any anomalies that are out there where reasonable, low-impact development is being held off just because of the current limits – and that is also good, so a few people could in fact gain and a little new wealth may be created. But there is a risk – there is a risk – let there be no doubt.

And this really brings me to my last statement on this topic – which I have to admit is more of an emotional statement rather than a professional one as a planner and urban designer. I opened by singing the praises of tall buildings. All over the world I am working to help people understand how to make these buildings work positively, how to transform unfortunate past practices in the design of tall buildings to achieve humanistic ends rather than the destructiveness that tall buildings have all too often represented. But that is because most cities have no choice; they have to live with taller and taller buildings because that has been the part of their cities from the beginning and the economic results have shut out any other approach. That is simply not the case with Washington.

So, I want to close by loudly singing the praises of the existing height limits in Washington. I hope you see what an extraordinary accomplishment these height limits represent; what an extraordinary and unique city they have created for you over a hundred years of careful custodianship. And perhaps the most compelling reason for this, and one that I have not really emphasized tonight, is that the city is just so comfortable, so liveable, so humane at its current scale.

You see, in the end, I am first and foremost a proponent of what I call “experiential planning” – planning and designing a city at all levels to understand and then create the direct day-to-day experiences that our citizens tell us they want for their city as they go about within it and use its buildings and spaces on a regular basis. And, of course, in the case of a capital, designing a place that all the citizens of an entire nation can feel delighted by and proud of and want to visit and be part of. This is what has all too often been missing in our planning and public policy making for all modern cities.

But I would argue that if you get it right and the resulting city comes to be beloved by your citizens, then the economic benefits will flow naturally. I don't have to do a survey to tell you

that your citizens and people throughout America want Washington to be a liveable place, an elegant place, a place of beauty.

It's not just about economic prowess and jobs. It's not just about expressing national power. It's about their preferred experiences every day. It's about the joyful pleasure of walking down a gently scaled street, of unexpectedly coming upon a magnificent public edifice that stands proudly superior to the mundane buildings around it, of feeling the gentle hospitality of a gracious green space, a square or park. It's about the frantic life of our modern world being made more bearable because the place we inhabit offers a respite – and I think we all would agree that a gently scaled building does that more easily than any massive building. It's about the historic buildings being preserved because their very caprice just makes us happier, sometimes when we least expect it but most need it.

So I close with a cautionary note. Be very careful as you gamble with the 100-year legacy of Washington's Height Act. Take care not to open things up too casually. I dare say, those height limits may be the single most powerful thing that has made this city so amazingly fulfilling.

Thank you.