

Height Master Plan for Washington, DC
PHASE 2

COMPILED PUBLIC COMMENTS

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 7 | MT. PLEASANT LIBRARY

WORKBOOK COMMENTS

Staff did their best to transcribe all handwritten comments. Originals are available upon request at the offices of the National Capital Planning Commission.

Frederic Harwood / Shaw, DC

Approach 1: Leaves the skyline looking like a pancake with a pencil sticking out of it. Limits the city's economic growth, jobs, retail. Limits the development of the "creative city," a place where creative people meet, interact, cross-fertilize to create technology, ideas, the future. Limits taxes to help lower income residents—taxes from increased densities of professionals and creative types generate tax revenue to build schools, recreation, and low income housing.

Approach 2: The relationship of height to street width is irrelevant. Philadelphia has 1,000 foot tall buildings in 2 & 3 lane streets (40-60 feet). What matters is the quality of what goes on at street level—restaurants, retail, theaters, open spaces, plazas—not how high the buildings are. We are over-planning and over-engineering the building heights. New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, do not tie building height to street width—put something interesting on the street and building heights will be irrelevant.

Approach 3: Yes to all three. Eliminating height limits would especially benefit under-developed areas such as Benning Road, Anacostia—where the economic benefits of high commercial towers would trickle into the surrounding neighborhoods and provide jobs, both professional and service jobs. L'Enfant city would benefit because it is nearly 100% built out and economic growth stagnating. The bowl outside L'Enfant city would benefit with housing, people, residents who would support retail, creating creative jobs, and pay income and real estate taxes to benefit all residents. Yes to illustrative clusters, especially around Metro. Washington has more metro stations than the rest of the system combined (VA & MD) and yet we show very little of the smart cluster building so evident in Rosslyn, Silver Spring, and Bethesda.

Approach 4: Absolutely. Take the handcuffs off the city. New residents, new employment centers, more jobs, more tax revenue for better schools, parks, recreation and low income housing. Take off the handcuffs. The federal government should have no interest in our city outside the federal footprint. Let Anacostia, Howard-town, Florida Ave, H Street, let them grow, blossom, with new businesses, new residents, new creativity. Let the city's residents plan the type of city that grows, not stagnate like to mid-sized, sleepy government town. I can't see much difference in DC modeling between 130 feet and 220 feet as long as the vistas/view corridors are preserved.

Katharine / Mt. Pleasant, DC

Economic Feasibility Analysis: Great presentation and excellent public process so far. Thank you for inviting the public to be so involved throughout the process.

To me, it seems that the Height Act has helped shape DC into the place it is today, but it is reasonable to revisit it given the city's growth, changing needs, and the skyrocketing housing prices. I think that the values—particularly in terms of preserving view and horizontality—are great and can be accepted by all. It was clear from the presentation that the DCOP values housing affordability. (I particularly appreciated the comment on the problems of affordability in highly restricted cities like Paris.) I hope this can continue to be a top priority—it really needs to be given the changes the city is experiencing. Thanks for the comment on opportunities like inclusionary zoning.

On another topic—the innovative suggestions for FAR (maintain it) or a height "beauty contest" are interesting. It would be great if this process could help DC get more distinctive buildings as well as taller buildings. However, I'm glad DCOP is not suggesting unlimited/developer-determined heights. Mega-buildings like London's Shard do not seem right for DC and would be particularly problematic if the growth trends ever reversed.

Rollie Smith / Columbia Heights, DC

General: We need higher density to allow more people who work here to live here—and maintain diversity. Higher limits in certain areas outside of or even at the edge of the L’Enfant city will do that if we plan well. Tall ensures diversity in building heights and style. Why don’t you use the growth projection for the city and the analysis of what is already happening to lower income families and workers to kick off the session—people need to understand why.

Approach 3: Certainly the Topo Bowl outside should be considered. Ensure the diversity, and ensure the affordability through inclusionary zoning. Do it as an auction—allow builders to bid large projects that will both ensure the bottom line and the social good as well as appearance. Consider the land between more housing and new jobs.

Approach 4: Consider neighborhood planning areas and pods which allow developers to break height limits if they meet certain criteria. Why should the feds hold back the city and its neighborhood from doing its own planning?

E. Hajian / Lanier Heights, DC

Approach 1: As consider height, need to think about the pedestrian-level interaction with buildings. Most buildings should have space at pedestrian level for shops, services, etc. otherwise we risk negative effects of urban renewal and anti-social 70’s architecture.

Approach 2: Current height is just fine. 160 feet is not pretty—also would drastically change the character of the city. Current height in DC plan; NOT height act.

Approach 3: Has anyone looked at the impact raising height will have on road networks? Tysons, Bethesda, Rosslyn, have horrible traffic. Can DC streets, already third most congested in the nation, handle the additional traffic that will come with the increase in population that would occupy taller buildings?

Approach 4: Noooooo!!!!

Economic Feasibility Analysis: Traffic! Quality of life! Infrastructure! All costs to DC—need a thorough analysis to determine if it really would be economically beneficial from a public cost/taxation standpoint.

General: Great meeting! Thank you for holding these and letting DC residents provide their input. The speaker was very good.

Christy Kwan / Truxton Circle, DC

Approach 1: Visually looks fine, but would prefer a height increase so the city can capitalize on greater economic benefits associated with greater height increases.

Approach 2: This is my least favorite option because the viewshed does not appear to be protected. Especially if we want to preserve the viewshed of our monuments and iconic buildings.

Approach 3: Raising the height limit in illustrative clusters seems to be the most favorable. Increased height at clusters is a good balance to maintain the horizontality of the city but allow more spaces for commercial and residential.

General: I understand the reasons why building massing is showing the worst case scenario, but it makes me concerned about the lack of open space that should be required with particular developments. For example, the new buildings in NOMA are at an acceptable height (and could expand higher), but lack the proper open space for a better experience at the street level. We must consider the ground floor experience in addition to the viewshed.

Bill Wright | U Street, DC

Approach 1: The existing height Act seems to have served the city well, both aesthetically and economically. It seems like it would be wise to wait a while to see how demographic changes play out—we can always raise the limit later, but no one is going to cut floors off their buildings once they’ve been built.

Approach 2: It’s not clear why “reinforce” is the right word here. That makes it sound like there won’t be changes, which isn’t what most of the proposals seem to do. “Alter” or “recalculate” would be more accurate. It also feels like the width v. height ratios are about right currently. Our streets have an excellent feel—busy enough to feel lively but not overly congested for pedestrians.

Approach 4: This seems like overkill at the current moment. The need for this kind of change should be demonstrated much more convincingly before this is done, even in small ways.

Robin Diener | Dupont Circle, DC

Economic Feasibility Analysis: The biggest “shock” come from filling in at the current affordable rate. It feels like there is so much room to grow now tithing the existing envelope. It would be useful to know how much space remains to be developed at the current height limit.

Marcy Logan | Dupont Circle, DC

Approach 1: Require penthouses to conform in appearance to base building and block.

Approach 2: Already done. Keep it that way.

Approach 4: Not a good idea.

GENERAL SESSION QUESTION & COMMENTS

The following summarizes questions asked at the August 7 meeting. All responses were provided by Harriet Tregoning, Director, DC Office of Planning, unless otherwise noted.

Q: My reaction is that even building to the current Height Act Limit (130 feet) would be bad enough. When we look at this view of 16th street, it's obviously a good thing we didn't.

Q: I noticed in the K street model you showed, some were raised and some weren't.

A: Some of those buildings might have been historic landmarks and were therefore taken out of discussion.

Q: Have you looked at how many of the penthouses have been built to the current height limit?

A: Most of the penthouses now are really just for mechanical systems. Its not our best feature; many rooftops here are ugly, though the good thing is no one is blocking your view. Even if there was a minimal height increase we could enforce making rooftops more attractive, perhaps by relocating mechanical systems.

Q: Does the economic feasibility analysis look at impacts on road networks, infrastructure costs, snow, maintenance, etc. Have we considered this?

A: Sort of. Our infrastructure capacity is being strained (water, sewer, roads). It does recognize it, therefore without investment coming from the occupancy of more spaces, we will continue to have that strain. Changes in property values and revenue would help finance these things. If we could capture more of the city's workforce, we may be able to alleviate some of the financial pressure.

Q: You had said historic buildings were left out of the discussions, is that the case even for approach #4?

A: I believe we excluded them, but a lot of the views were from a distance so it was hard to tell.

Q: Columbia Heights was not included in the model but it could be, should it be?

A: We didn't pick every area for the study, but in the future when we may go more in depth we would look in areas in particular like Columbia Heights.

Q: The modeling shows a lot of uniformity (in height). What about the possibility of planned use developments for some based on density?

A: Perhaps we hold an auction giving the highest height to the prettiest buildings. Also not changing the Floor Area Ratio, we have heard good suggestions.

Q: Mr. Acosta, brought up the idea that the streets would be affected. What are you doing to model at the street level? To get a sense of the height changes?

A: Great idea, perhaps a walking tour so we can look at shadows, looking at the street to height ratios...let me think about it.

Q: I've been led to believe that historically no buildings were supposed to go no higher than the height of the Capitol building, but the topography here will vary the height of buildings if given a specific height limit. The buildings here don't give us the feeling of a rapidly-paced NYC; the horizontal city is easy going. Going in the opposite direction, we lose that country feel. Why not leave the center city alone and change the heights further away from the center of the city.

A: One of the things about Paris, no one can afford to live there. We don't want that here.

Q: Did the study include an environmental point of view? Environmental impact studies? Does the Height Act allow for us to make more space for trees?

A: In short no. But we do have a sustainability plan that did quickly look at shadows and their effects on trees.

Q: Let's look at the ecology in Washington. One of the things we want is a greener DC. However, how can we achieve these efforts by increasing density, reducing air quality, carbon emissions?

A: Well were not adding new impervious surfaces since all changes were made to existing buildings.

I love the tree canopy on Military Rd. Let's make K Street more like Military Rd? We need to decrease the CO2 blanket.

I would like to find out more info. It seems like there needs to be much more research. It's not just fire safety anymore. Every person that comes, comes with a carbon footprint; we don't have the infrastructure here to support these people.

Q: I am failing to understand the affordability aspect. Are you telling me that a landlord will all of the sudden provide affordable housing because of more space in his building?

A: I can't prevent a way for people to move here, but if we supply housing, housing prices will go down. We have inclusionary zoning as well—we decide (DC), not federal, how affordability will be addressed with more study.

Q: I'm thinking of local needs-population growth. Why do this at all? We are a growing city, lots of people moving here.

A: About 1100 people a month, 2.17% a year between 2008 and 2012. Mayor's sustainability strategy projects that in 20 years we could potentially meet our max population. Offices are taking up a lot less room, but residences not necessarily. One of the assessments we will be using is MWCOG population projections.

Q: How far below peak population are we now?

A: Post World War 2 we were at our greatest population of about 850,000 but that included temporary housing for military and the barracks.

Q: Can our current carrying capacity accommodate population growth?

A: In the short term we can but not necessarily in the future. So we want to be able to accommodate those in the future.

Q: How can changes in the Height Act affect infrastructure systems (utilities)?

A: Climate related extreme weather events have contributed to extreme weather events, but we are undergrounding all of our utilities. We are going to have to absolutely make infrastructure improvements, enabling us to grow.

People are talking about our skyline, all I see is a pancake with a pencil. 130-200 doesn't make a difference to me. The clusters provide the most reasonable option. It lends a lot of variety to skyline.

Every time you double or triple the size of the building, you double or triple revenues and therefore support low and moderate income families at practically no cost.

Q: What is considered low density?

A: R-1 to R-4

Q: Why did House Committee on Government Reform—Darrell Issa—suggest this, was this out of thin air? Was he responding to a city request?

A: He requested that NCPC and the City analyze this matter last year when we discussed the height of penthouses.

You are talking about "how we feel," well how crowded the sidewalk is affects how I feel.

Q: We talked about the simplicity of the Height Act, but it lacks language as to what the Height Act will actually say.

A: That is what the draft recommendation period is for, we don't have any language yet, until we hear from everyone at these meetings.

Q: I know you are combined with NCPC, but I feel you all have different interests. Will there be one or two reports at the end of this?

A: Marcel: We are trying to have just one report.

Q: In response to the option of clusters-as a person who lives in a high density area, I don't think it's fair to allow low density areas that have the enjoyment of living in low density areas to continue to live in that way. It is not fair to people like me that I need to be subject to waking up next to a box.

A: Well not everyone who lives in a high density necessarily sees density as a bad thing, they see it as a good thing, access to more goods and services, etc.

Q: What about the notion that increasing heights does not alleviate prices, however raises prices over all?

A: No one is arguing that high rise is housing is the most affordable type of housing but from an economic standpoint, more supply will allow for more affordable housing.
