

Height Master Plan for Washington, DC

PHASE 2

COMPILED PUBLIC COMMENTS

SATURDAY, AUGUST 10 | CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY CROUGH CENTER

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.

Robin Diener | Dupont Circle, DC

Approach 2: Basic relationship ratios should be retained. Even if the height is increased, it should be done with the street to the building ratios.

Approach 3: Retain horizontal nature. Do not allow punctuation by tall buildings unless they are civic or monumental. No tall private or commercial buildings.

Approach 4: No!

Stephen Crim | Logan Circle, DC

Approach 1: From an urban design and infrastructure perspective, I have no strong opinion about Approach 1. From a home-rule perspective, I would not be happy with this outcome. I believe that, outside federal property, DC should have decision-making authority over building height.

Approach 2: This approach seems to provide greater flexibility for the city while also providing urban-design sensibility. I am not sure if this is my preferred option, but I would be content with it as an outcome. Obviously, it doesn't allow home rule, but it does give DC more options.

Approach 3: Again, I like the increased flexibility, but not the lack of home rule. 3C is most appealing to me from an urban design viewpoint.

Approach 4: I would be happy with this approach given that height, density, and other conditions would be governed by local law. In the end, I do not like federal restriction on our building heights, or at least heights outside of federally-owned land.

Vincent G. Carter | Ward 8 Anacostia

Approach 1: This will increase property values through marketing of existing and expanded penthouse structure. I support this approach because it maintains the original concept and approach. I prefer limiting expansion of penthouses and maintaining the setbacks. Concern with where the existing equipment in the penthouses will be located or relocated. Approach 1 will provide most easily accessible revenue for DC—permits and construction costs.

Approach 2: Good approach/alternative. Will work well with the historical structures impact on the city's fabric.

Approach 3: Select areas should be considered along with viewsheds and our key landmarks.

Approach 4: Negative reactions, please do not suggest this approach. It completely destroys the fabric of the city and completely changes how one will think of Washington, DC.

Great session. Thanks, Harriet.

None /None

Approach 4: I like Approach 4. Look at the Georgia Avenue corridor. Start at Georgia and Blair Rd NW. I like the illustrative area clusters concept. Let private market forces be creative with our skyline. Let's not be stuck in 1790.



[Photo of Seattle's skyline as a model for DC]

GENERAL SESSION QUESTION & COMMENTS

The following summarizes questions asked at the August 10 meeting. All responses were provided by Harriet Tregoning, Director, DC Office of Planning, unless otherwise noted.

- Q: Clusters – Was Catholic University part of the clusters? Older Soldiers’ Home, Van Ness—does that also increase height going up to Georgia Avenue?
- A: We took this map and overlaid it with transit and development potential that was fully built out; any of these areas in red could be used in cluster or approach. Portions of the Armed Forces Retirement Home were slated for development but not developed. These are the places that were identified, marked in red, and served by transit.
- Q: You can go up to Connecticut, Georgia, and Wisconsin and see clusters?
- A: Not so much Georgia. These are nodes of medium- or high-density.
- Q: Take Connecticut up Van Ness and Wisconsin up Friendship Heights, for example. You’re saying that those corridors would raise height?
- A: Think of it as circles around transit, retail, and high-density nodes. Our intention with the modeling was to illustrate cluster nodes rather than corridors.
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- Q: How will increases in height help many demographic groups? Been here 15 years, and people with families move out to the suburbs. You talk about affordability, but how about affordability for the middle class? How will increases in height provide for all?
- A: These are great questions, and important for us to think about in considering the way we increase height. We need to ask: if we do, how? We unfortunately won’t be able to address all of these local issues in our recommendations to Congress. We understand any increase in height that the city would be a proponent of would have to include impacts on housing affordability. If we don’t do anything to change it, we would have more price pressures than we already feel. This is certainly something the District is already thinking about.
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- Q: Late last month, you [Harriet] stated, “Well before 20 years from now, we would exhaust the capacity of our city to accommodate the population growth.” Where did you get this information? Is this published anywhere? You need to put this information on the website, along with the economic feasibility study. What is DCOP’s position?
- A: The city hasn’t taken a position, and we haven’t briefed the mayor. What is the benefit to the city, and projection of the city? The current projection for the city in the next 20 years is that 100% of our capacity would be reached. We are feeling the pressure of increased demand on housing today, and not enough housing available. During Phase 3, we will include a range of calculations for population growth, and where we would feel the capacity growth.
- Q: What about the forecast?
- A: We looked at the development envelope in downtown and significant portions of the city, and studying various growth scenarios. Even in more moderate growth scenarios, we might have a few more decades, but still well short of 100 years.
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- Q: I would like to know, how do you figure out that we are getting 1,100 new residents every month? Is that report available? Is it truly statistical information?
- A: This information comes from the U.S. Census. We get information annually every December, and divide the number by 12 for a monthly average.
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Q: I would like to thank the NCPC staff for their dedication to public input through these public meetings. What is missing is an overhead view of Connecticut Avenue. Many of these overall views on the screen are taken from a helicopter, and few can see from that view, or access some of the areas these photos were taken from (e.g. Meridian Hill Park). NCPC is doing a terrific job, and this is a good first step, but we need a lot more to achieve any of these goals that are set forth. I wonder if there is somewhat of a disconnect of the clusters in increasing building height, and the state of our infrastructure. WASA is currently struggling with the size of projects they manage, and the future stormwater considerations that L'Enfant never envisioned or the impact of global warming—this is the disconnect. Then there is a matter of penthouse redesign. Most of the penthouses are facing alleys or back of streets. Rather than have blank architectural feature in each avenue or street, one has to consider the school of architecture specific to each structure, and that people will be experiencing the city on foot and not from the air. I think NCPC has done a very good job on acquainting us with planning in the city, but lacking in statistical pace. We are in pretty good shape in the city. NCPC has a lot more work ahead of us before briefing Congressman Issa.

A: To clarify, this is not a sole-NCPC study, but a joint effort. Part of the analysis, conducted by SOM, was contracted by DCOP. On the local side, DCOP already plans on rebuilding the city's stormwater infrastructure regardless of this study.

Q: I'm having trouble discerning the differences between approaches 2, 3, 4, and 3c. Approaches 2 and 4 would look like 3c, given the real estate market and where the demand would be. Is there something with the analysis that I am missing?

A: 2 would give you a variety, because with the ratio, the ultimate height of the buildings will still vary with the street widths. This is the closest to what we currently have, although it does allow significant new height. Approach 4 would wipe away the relationship and have more development capacity, but less interesting and varied neighborhoods. Approach 3c applies height increases only to specific clusters in the city, which gives some (interesting) development capacity and can accommodate additional growth where needed.

Q: I am a longtime resident of the district. DC is a city of neighborhoods. Raising heights along places like Maryland Avenue, and buildings taller than 130 feet would be ruining our neighborhoods and destroy green space. What would happen to low income residents and low income housing that is here? Once you set a goal to raise the height, what stops someone building next to me up to that height?

A: We wanted to protect neighborhoods. Low density areas were taken off the table for higher building consideration. The ones being affected would be the ones already identified in the District's Comprehensive Plan Future Land Use Maps for additional growth. The intention is to not bring additional heights to the low-density neighborhoods, as the comp plan already indicates.

Q: I wanted to talk about the process. Maybe this is semantics, but for approach 1b, is it something the city could do without changes to the federal Height Act?

A: No; we would need to make change in the federal law for 1b to happen.

I like approach number 4. We are looking at the L'Enfant concept, standing in and looking out. I like standing out looking in. I would like to preserve views of the capital and national monuments. I don't like the idea of preserving central regions but allowing private market structure to build up vertically outside and lose site of the monuments and the river. I would rather have outside looking in. I brought a picture of Seattle. Market forces made the skyline in this city. If we build clusters looking in, you would preserve the areas downtown, and still have a nice tall building outside that. If you look at Walter Reed, there is enough buffer to see something vertical. Keep the character of L'Enfant and Banneker.

- Q: I found the economic feasibility study very cryptic and difficult to understand. It raises a lot of question, and doesn't address why we would change heights in the first place. Could we see a presentation about the economic feasibility study?
- A: DCOP person presenting that study is unwell. I can sit down with you, or make time on our last meeting, to make sure our presentation includes the feasibility study.
- Q: Will it be included in Phase 3?
- A: Yes
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- Q: You said that federal buildings are excluded, however Old Soldiers' Home and Walter Reed are included?
- A: Walter Reed is not included. We didn't study Walter Reed, but Old Soldiers' Home is. They are exceptions; Congress doesn't fund their operations, so they have looked at private development of the southern part of their properties.
- Q: How are low density historic districts defined and excluded for development? Ex: Dupont Circle. What is the height limit?
- A: Low density isn't zoning, but comp plan. Historic districts are individually mapped. If the area was on the comp plan and was considered high density, it was included even if it was a historic district.
- Q: The request from Congress was to consider areas outside of the L'Enfant City, but it looks like the study is really targeting within the L'Enfant City.
- A: The letter from Chairman Issa certainly distinguished inside and outside. We interpreted that as he suggested, he wanted to look at both, and especially focus on impacts inside the L'Enfant city. This does not, however, suggest that we are only interested in height increase in the L'Enfant. We just wanted to make sure we study everything very carefully.
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- Q: I suggest that for Approach 2, you break it down into A and B. There should be an option to reduce the ratio of building height to street width as well as increase it. In some of the models where the buildings raise up to current allowable heights, I don't like the result and would rather not allow it. I see buildings going up on North Capitol Street, which is starting to obstruct the view already. Even with what we allow now, our infrastructure is at capacity (stormwater, power grid). I feel that there is an impact now with what we have. And if everybody built up to what is up to now, we wouldn't be able to sustain that growth. I would like to see an approach to restrict.
- A: So you mean asking Congress to request to restrict what we can already do? I'm trying to get clarification, that city should consider downsizing or federal government should further restrict us?
- Q: I think we should consider both. Encroachment and ball starts rolling and any growth to buildings mean more impact to traffic. It takes 90 minutes from the top of the city to Capitol Hill. Impact. The small changes with the penthouse, if we put homes, where does HVAC go?
- A: Most people commute into the District. We would like to capture the people working in the District to live in the District. That would reduce the commuting impact. Lower environmental impact etc. are all things we are addressing in our sustainability plan.
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Height Act has forced us to spread out, and has helped drive development to all corners of the city. Could we find out, how much sq ft, air right space, is left to be developed under status quo? Maybe this would be serving us much better, rather than how much can we grow, and how the height act is effectively helping us grow out, which will make a more walkable city.

If timeline is 100 years, and our opportunity to look at Height Act and shape of city, some of the points on the table are important and need to be there. This may not be a popular view of the city, but important to look at. The view at North Capitol or topographic bowl. The development isn't only height act, but also zoning, but maybe Congress need to provide guidance and additional restrictions on specific areas and views.

Q: Has there been study on how much population to accommodate under each scenarios?

A: We haven't done that, but will need to do that as part of a recommendation. We wanted to hear that from the public and look at population growth and economic growth.

Q: I want Congress to stay out of our business.

A: Even if the Height Act were changed today, we would have to make changes to the District's comp plan and zoning before any new, taller developments occurred. A lot needs to happen even if Congress permitted us to raise heights.

Q: I am here because I'm worried about affordability and housing. And you have it as a selling point. If now, affordable housing laws are already not enforced, why would you think it would be with taller buildings?

A: There wouldn't be anything preventing us from putting more affordable housing restrictions. Since 2006 the city has used inclusionary zoning to require development to provide affordable housing. Pressure on housing cost would be less if there is more supply.