My name is George Clark. I am a 40 year resident of this City, drawn to it by its scale and beauty. I am a past Chair of the Committee of 100 on the Federal City, a three time President of Federation of Citizens Associations, served 6 years on the Zoning Review Task Force, and am currently on the DDOT Transportation Planning Task Force.

I urge you to reject the late and unvetted proposal from the Office of Planning and keep the Height of Buildings Act as it is, with perhaps further study of the penthouse issue as noted by the Staff Report, which I heartily endorse. I say unvetted because in none of the public meetings this past summer did OP give even a hint of this Manhattanization proposal to any of the citizens who attended. In fact OP denied that it had any intent to ask for so many tall buildings in so many places. And even with that, the large majority of those in attendance saw no reason to change the Height Act. And now OP goes directly to Rep. Issa, without even bothering to ask the citizens what they think. Some Home Rule issue. The people don’t want change so let’s do an end run around them in Congress!
But OP tells us that we need tall buildings so that housing will be less expensive, you know, like in Manhattan or downtown Chicago. Recognizing the folly of this assertion, OP tries to justify it at page 14 of the Economic Analysis of the Height Master Plan from James Davis Construction (forget why you’d ask a construction company to do an economic analysis):

While newly constructed higher-rise apartments are likely to have relatively high rents, expansion of the housing supply should result in lower rents if new supply exceeds the growth in demand. The availability of new apartments will put competitive pressure on existing buildings to renovate and maintain their edge and/or lower their rents. Units that are not as well located and maintained will see a lessening of demand and lower rents. However, the impacts on prevailing rents are likely to occur primarily at the margin. The District’s high costs of development and natural market forces will limit the extent of oversupply and rent reductions over the longer term, though during the down parts of market cycles, the additional supply could lead to lower rents until supply and demand are back in balance.

In other words, rents will go down if we overbuild tall building housing for rich folks because they will move out of their current housing which will deteriorate and be more affordable for the masses. And if that doesn’t work, a good depression might come along and lower rents! And by the way, forget that ownership stuff – you will all be renters.

So what is the real reason for OP pushing for tall buildings? Fortunately we have the answer from the Board of Trade. In an e-mail the BOT sent me they said the following:

Yesterday the District of Columbia Office of Planning released the District’s Height Study Draft Recommendations which calls for Congress to modify the Height Act to allow for taller [buildings] in the District. As indicated in the press release linked below, this recommendation will result in a substantial opportunity for increased future development in the District.
Well now we know who this building height is supposed to help -- not the average person, not the poor, not the homeless – but developers! Thank you OP!

And let’s not forget the claim that D.C. will gain significant property tax benefits. When is last time you heard that the City did not give a developer of a large project 25 years of tax relief or TIF financing to build, thus wiping out any tax benefit?

Home Rule is not more height for favored developers. It isn’t jeopardizing the views, the scale and the feel that has made this City iconic and made it grow and prosper and attract more residents. Home Rule is Statehood, or voting rights or budget autonomy. OP has come up with a solution in search of a problem. Let’s file it where it belongs.