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NCPC Approves Final Recommendations on Height Study

Washington, DC - At their November 19, 2013 Special Meeting, the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) approved recommendations regarding amending the Height of Buildings Act (Height Act), a federal law setting maximums on building heights throughout Washington, DC. The recommendations and accompanying report will be transmitted to Congress.

The Commission action followed a year-long Height Master Plan study conducted jointly by NCPC and the District of Columbia at the request of the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. The Commission, which includes both federal and District representatives, considered extensive public comment. Following lengthy deliberations their final recommendations, listed below, closely reflect the direction established in the earlier draft recommendations, released in September 2013.

Height Master Plan Recommendations

1. To protect the integrity of the form and character of the nation's capital, the federal Height Act should remain in place and no changes should be made to the formula or approach for calculating allowable building height.
2. There may be some opportunities for strategic change in the areas outside of the L'Enfant City where there is less concentration of federal interests. However, additional study is required to understand whether strategic changes to the Height Act would impact federal interests within this area.
3. The city's most significant viewsheds, to include without limitation, those to and from the U.S. Capitol and the White House, should be further evaluated and federal and local protections established, which include policies in the Federal and District Elements of the Comprehensive Plan.
4. Amend the Height Act to allow for human occupancy in existing and future penthouses, with the following restrictions:
 - Include specific protections related to sightlines for select federal buildings including but not limited to, the U.S. Capitol and White House.
 - Support communal recreation space on rooftops by allowing human occupancy in roof structures, where use of those structures is currently restricted under the Height Act to mechanical equipment, so long as the façade of these structures continue to be set back from exterior building walls at a 1:1 ratio.
 - Impose an absolute 20 foot maximum height and a limitation of one story for penthouse structures above the level of the roof, which must contain within all mechanical equipment and elevator, stair other enclosures, with no additional construction allowed above the penthouse roof for any purpose.
5. Delete Sections 2-4 of the Height Act, as contained at 36 Stat 452, chap 263, sec 2-4 (1910), which solely relate to fireproof construction. These proposed deletions are antiquated fire and safety requirements that have been updated and incorporated into modern day codes by the District of Columbia.

Additional information about the recommendations, the height study, and public comments are online at www.ncpc.gov/heightstudy.

The National Capital Planning Commission is the federal government's central planning agency in the District of Columbia and surrounding counties of Maryland and Virginia. The Commission provides overall guidance for federal land and buildings in the region. It also reviews the design of federal projects and memorials, oversees long-range planning for future development, and monitors capital investment by federal agencies.

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