

Testimony
of
Roger K. Lewis
appearing before the
Subcommittee on Health Care, District of Columbia, Census and the National Archives
July 19, 2012
Hearing to Examine Issues Surrounding the District of Columbia 1910 Heights Act

My name is Roger K. Lewis, and I thank you for inviting me to testify before this Subcommittee.

I am a practicing architect, urban designer, and professor emeritus of architecture at the University of Maryland. Since 1984, I have written the Washington Post's "Shaping the City" column, and since 2007 I have been a regular guest on WAMU-FM's Kojo Nnamdi radio show. District of Columbia height limits periodically have been a topic of my column and the Kojo Nnamdi show.

I believe some modifications of the 1910 statute, with appropriate zoning changes in carefully chosen areas, are needed and should be considered.

In America, building height limits were based initially on several considerations: (1) recognizing fire-fighting, structural, vertical transportation and other technical constraints; (2) ensuring adequate light, air, ventilation and views desirable for public streets, civic spaces and abutting private properties; (3) respecting historically prevalent building heights in established neighborhoods that pre-existed zoning; and (4) making necessary aesthetic value judgments about urban design and architectural form. Yet inevitably height limits are arbitrary - for example, why 90 feet rather than 85 or 95 feet? In fact, there are no formulas or universal standards for setting exact height limits.

In the District of Columbia since 1910, these considerations have constituted the basis for stipulating and maintaining height limits. Thanks to these historic limits, the nation's capital has remained a uniquely memorable, low- and mid-rise city. From many places in the city, views of America's most iconic, symbolically significant structures - the U.S.

Capitol, the Washington Monument, the Lincoln and Jefferson memorials, the White House - have been preserved because downtown skyscrapers cannot be erected.

Yet there are places in the District of Columbia where height limits established decades ago are today inappropriate and unnecessarily constraining, a reflection of outdated planning and zoning practices from the early and mid-20th century. These practices were characterized most notably by designation of large areas - land use zones - within the city limited to predominantly one use and uniform height limit. Broad-brush, one-size-fits-all planning and zoning failed to take into account, within each land use zone, locational variations in topography, solar orientation, views and vistas, proximity to parks, adjacency to civic open spaces, and infrastructure, especially transit. It did not differentiate between mid-block properties and properties at major intersections.

Today's city planning, urban design and architectural principles and techniques - such as computer-based Geographic Information Systems (GIS) - are far more sophisticated and effective. Broadbrush strategies of the past are obsolete. We now can engage in fine-grain planning, urban design and zoning. We can identify, analyze and designate specific sites in the city where increased building height and density make great sense aesthetically, environmentally, functionally, socially and economically. This "smart growth" approach can enhance the city's urban and architectural qualities while yielding fiscal benefits for the city. Furthermore, enacted as an incentive bonus overlaying existing zoning in appropriate locations, increased building height limits - and density - can engender development of much needed affordable housing.

Where should height limits change? In the downtown l'Enfant Plan area of the District, including traditional residential neighborhoods, height limits should remain substantially unchanged to preserve the center city's dominant character and skyline. But there are specific sites - such as the Southwest and Anacostia River waterfronts - where upward adjustment of height limits would be beneficial without jeopardizing the city's historic profile. Outside the l'Enfant Plan area, many sites could be suitable for higher buildings, especially near Metro stations and major roadways.

The only equitable, professionally responsible method for identifying places to raise height limits, and for determining new height limits, is to create a detailed, city-wide plan, prior to any rezoning, based on a rigorous, comprehensive study. This is essential to avoid piecemeal, property-by-property relaxation of height limits through variances, exceptions and ad hoc rezonings, a process too often influenced by political and financial pressures. Because municipal and federal interests are involved, the building height study and plan should be prepared collaboratively and transparently by the D.C. Office of Planning and the National Capital Planning Commission.

Many Washingtonians are apprehensive when anyone suggests modifying D.C. height limits. They envision Rosslyn-like skyscrapers rising all over town, ruining the capital's historic image. Some believe that raising D.C. height limits anywhere would set precedents invariably opening the proverbial "barn door" to greedy developers in league with corrupt politicians, enabling high-rise buildings throughout the city.

But skeptical citizens need to understand that, through fine-grain urban design, prudent legislation and precisely targeted, well enforced land use regulation, the barn door will not and cannot be thrown open. Therefore, revisiting D.C. height limits requires not only a credible, city-wide planning effort, but also an on-going public education effort to help citizens recognize that legislation adopted over a century ago can be improved.

Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Witness Disclosure Requirement – “Truth in Testimony”
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Name: ROGER K. LEWIS

1. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants or subcontracts) you have received since October 1, 2009. Include the source and amount of each grant or contract.

NONE

2. Please list any entity you are testifying on behalf of and briefly describe your relationship with these entities.

NONE

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NONE

I certify that the above information is true and correct.
Signature:

Date:

JULY 17, 2012

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Roger K. Lewis, FAIA, Biographical Summary

Roger K. Lewis, a fellow of the American Institute of Architects, is a practicing architect and urban planner; a professor emeritus of architecture at the University of Maryland College Park; and an author and journalist.

After earning architecture degrees at M.I.T. and serving as a Peace Corps volunteer architect in Tunisia, Lewis helped start the architecture program at the University of Maryland School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, where he taught architectural design from 1968 to 2006. In the 1990s he helped launch the university's National Center for Smart Growth. Throughout his teaching career, he also maintained an award-winning architecture and planning practice based in Washington, DC. Since 1969, his firm has designed or co-designed a wide range of projects - new communities, residential complexes, affordable housing, schools, recreational facilities, art centers - for both private and public sector clients.

In 1998 the U.S. General Services Administration appointed Lewis to GSA's Design Excellence National Peer Committee, which reviews the design of federal projects, and he serves periodically as a GSA design consultant. GSA projects on which he has worked include: new federal courthouse projects in Seattle, Washington, and Gulfport, Mississippi; the new Oklahoma City federal office building; and modernizations of federal buildings in Washington, DC, and Bangor, Maine. Following the Oklahoma City bombing, he was appointed to serve on a GSA committee considering security, urban design and architectural issues pertaining to the Federal Triangle in Washington, DC, leading to new design standards. He also advised GSA concerning security challenges at the historic federal courthouse in Providence, Rhode Island.

A member of the government-appointed Design Review Board for "Carlyle" and "Eisenhower East," redeveloping sectors of Alexandria, Virginia, he is also a planning and architectural design consultant to other metropolitan Washington jurisdictions and agencies: Montgomery County and Rockville, Maryland; Arlington County, Virginia; and the Washington Area Metropolitan Transit Authority.

In 2004-05, he led a team of national experts exploring and recommending housing policy options for Houston, Texas. More recently, he served on a committee that established environmental design standards for real estate development in the District of Columbia affecting the Anacostia River. Part of his consulting work for government and other institutional clients entails stakeholder education, professional training, workshop facilitation, public outreach and management of national and international design competitions.

Since 1984, The Washington Post has published his thematic, illustrated column, "Shaping the City," about architecture, planning and urban development. His unique columns and cartoons have received numerous awards and have been republished nationally and internationally. The subject of several exhibits around the United States, "Shaping the City" drawings were shown at a one-man exhibition at the National Building Museum in Washington, DC, in 1999-2000. The museum is currently planning to co-publish a book of his cartoons, to be titled "The Design Comedy."

In his Washington Post column, Professor Lewis writes about principles, policies and practices related to architecture, smart growth, sustainability, land use planning and regulation, transportation and infrastructure, building codes, construction technology, security, housing and real estate development. Since 2007, he has been a regular guest on the Kojo Nnamdi Show, broadcast by American University's National Public Radio affiliate WAMU-FM, discussing "Shaping the City" issues. Frequently invited to give talks to professional and civic organizations, he is the author or co-author of numerous journal articles and books, among them *Architect? A Candid Guide to the Profession* and *The Growth Management Handbook*.

Professor Lewis volunteers for and engages in a number of "pro bono publico" activities. He was co-chair of the building committee for the Woolly Mammoth Theatre in D.C., and is a trustee of the National Children's Museum, chairing its building committee. He is also a trustee of the Peace Corps Commemorative Foundation, which is planning to create a modestly scaled commemorative work in Washington recognizing and honoring the historically significant founding of the Peace Corps in 1961.