

TESTIMONY OF HARRIET TREGONING

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF PLANNING

BEFORE

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH CARE AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

REPRESENTATIVE TREY GOWDY, CHAIR



CHANGES TO THE HEIGHTS ACT: SHAPING WASHINGTON, D.C. FOR THE FUTURE

JULY 19, 2012

1:30 PM

2154 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Good afternoon, Chairman Gowdy, and Members and staff of the Subcommittee. I am Harriet Tregoning, Director of the District of Columbia Office of Planning. Thank you for this opportunity to appear before your subcommittee today on behalf of Mayor Vincent Gray in support of modest proposed changes to the 1910 federal Height Act.

As you may know, roof top structures are already permitted under the Height Act. While allowed, these roof structures have been limited in their use to mechanical purposes (elevator overrides, building mechanicals) and are currently prohibited from uses that qualify as "human occupancy" such as recreation rooms or office space. Allowing their use for more active purposes will have no real impact on the overall maximum heights of buildings as permitted by the 1910 Height Act and will not impact the District's recognizable and historic skyline.

The Height Act has been a defining element in creating the city's skyline and has resulted in an iconic form for the Nation's Capital. I believe that the District of Columbia will always limit the height of buildings, whatever the ultimate fate of a federal Height Act. This relationship between the width of streets and the height of buildings is an important one, but let me underscore that there is nothing sacred about the particular numbers (the width of the street + 10 feet for residential streets, and + 20 feet for commercial streets); rather that the notion of a relationship and a relatively low and human scale is the key. In fact, Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, which as the Presidential Inauguration route is one of the nation's most symbolic stretches of public avenue, already hosts buildings with heights up to 160 feet, and may then have roof structures; the additional 30+ feet of height is not particularly noticeable.

The human-scaled city that has been created through an intimate relationship between the width of streets and boulevards and the corresponding heights of buildings on those streets is more walkable, more beautiful and more unique as a result. Allowing other uses of roof top structures would not change that. The Act has created great views and vistas that are underscored by the city's topography. Restricting the use of roof structures to purely mechanical purposes forbids peoples' enjoyment of some of the city's greatest spaces and most striking views.

These views and these amazing spaces might also be among the city's most valuable, given their scarcity and their largely unobstructed vistas. With almost 40% of the District's land tax exempt¹ or otherwise off the city's tax rolls, this is an opportunity to increase the tax base and our fiscal stability by allowing this building area to be occupied with no impact on land, height or neighborhood character. I will note that a federal action to amend the Height Act will need to be followed by local action to consider amendments to the District's zoning code to allow such a change in use, with all the public notice and public input that such an action would entail. While not pre-judging the outcome of that local process, we urge your support of a federal action to , permit use of the roof structures for other than mechanical space which will then allow the Home Rule and self-governance determinations of the District of Columbia to proceed.

¹ Includes: Hospitals, WMATA, DC and Federal government, embassies, universities, religious and military lands

In conclusion, I respectfully ask your support for this modest amendment to the Height Act, one that has the potential to substantially enhance the District of Columbia's tax base while continuing to respect the city's existing horizontal and human scale.

Harriet Tregoning



Harriet Tregoning is the Director of the Washington DC Office of Planning, where she works to make DC a walkable, bikeable, eminently livable, globally competitive and sustainable city. Prior to this she was the director of the Governors' Institute on Community Design and co-founder, with former Maryland Governor Glendening, and executive director of the Smart Growth Leadership Institute.

Tregoning developed her expertise in state level action in the State of Maryland where she served Governor Glendening as both Secretary of Planning and then as the nation's first state-level Cabinet Secretary for Smart Growth. Prior to her tenure in Maryland state government, Tregoning was the director of Development, Community and Environment at the United States Environmental Protection Agency. Tregoning's academic training is in engineering and public policy. She was a Loeb Fellow at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design for 2003-2004.

