

**Testimony of the Committee of 100 on the Federal City on the Wax Museum Site:
Request for Proposals before the Council of the District of Columbia Committee
on Economic Advancement 26 March 2001 Judiciary Square, Room 700**

Good morning Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee.

I am Jim Nathanson, Vice Chairman of the Committee of 100 on the Federal City and a member of its Task Force on NoMa, the area in which the Wax Museum Site is located. I am here on behalf of the Committee of 100 to support strongly approval of the Request for Proposals for the Wax Museum Site as proposed by the Administration and Redevelopment Land Agency.

The Committee of 100 has long been a strong advocate for a mixture of land uses in Downtown to create a vibrant environment at once attractive to residents and visitors and one that meets the needs of workers, citizens, and guests alike and better creates and sustains value for the property owners and the city.

Housing in Downtown and in areas concentrated nearby is critical to achieving these goals. More than any other use or special project, the placement and nurturing of residential communities at the core is what distinguishes great cities and is what keeps them healthy.

The program incorporated into the proposed RFP recognizes this, the Administration and the RLA Board by advancing it recognize this and are to be commended for it and, we strongly believe that the development community, presented with this opportunity, will also recognize it and respond in numbers with high quality offerings that will be the foundation and catalyst for dramatic and appropriate redevelopment of this whole area that we call the Mt. Vernon Triangle.

As the Councilmembers are no doubt aware, city policy for this area, the Mt. Vernon triangle, since the 1960s has been for the creation of a vibrant, in-town, mixed use neighborhood. That vision has been reaffirmed by every major planning study and adopted plan since. And now, the marketplace is ready to make it happen.

Finally, the market dynamics and general positive environment of the city have reached the point where the type of redevelopment proposed in the RFP is attractive to residents and therefore to residential developers. No longer do we need to look over the Potomac to see new condos and apartments where those who make a living in the city will inevitably park their cars and lay their heads at night. We can compete. No longer do we need to concede the vitality they could give to our city, their support for our merchants and institutions, and their tax dollars. We can compete. We must take every opportunity to do so. The Wax Museum is a great opportunity to do just that.

The Committee of 100, approximately 4 years ago, launched an intensive study of the Mt. Vernon Triangle area. Our objective was to test the continuing wisdom and viability of the longstanding policies for the area. That effort resulted in a draft concept plan for Mt. Vernon Triangle. It was developed in consultation with the surrounding community. It took a hard look at opportunities and constraints presented by the area.

What we found was continuing strong support for the planning vision and, importantly, an area poised to make it a reality. We found great opportunities for compatible redevelopment. Development patterns were trending toward the area from every direction. Assemblage activity was well underway. And, critically, the city owns approximately 45 percent of the land other than streets of which almost three quarters remained undeveloped. So, we had a fantastic opportunity, through appropriate stewardship of our public resources to catalyze achievement of the vision and take advantage of emerging trends consistent with the planning objectives.

The Wax Museum site is the largest such opportunity. We recommended, therefore, strategic use of this public site to set the tone for the new neighborhood. At the Wax Museum, the available envelope should be dedicated to housing. The ground floor commercial space should be targeted to neighborhood serving retail uses—necessary not only to sustain the emerging community, but to serve pent-up demand from the adjacent neighborhood to the north.

Since issuing our draft concept plan, these recommendations were endorsed at the community workshops held by the Cultural Development Corporation in its NoMa planning effort. The recently released Downtown Action Plan reiterated those same objectives and strategies.

The RFP before you does the same. It should be approved.

The Wax Museum will be a success if you allow it to proceed as proposed. But, it and the larger area will need additional attention and effort. Those efforts are also underway, and we very much applaud them and the efforts of the Office of Planning that has committed to promulgating urban design guidelines to help guide redevelopment. It will present a first cut to the Zoning Commission next month after conducting a public workshop on that issue. The Committee of 100 intends to work closely with OP and the community to contribute to those guidelines and to urge the Zoning Commission to schedule and take prompt action.

We need to identify new parks for the area. Mt. Vernon Triangle, when successfully redeveloped, will have a residential population of more than 6,000 and more than 10,000 workers. We need to invest now in creating an environment that will sustain that community.

We need to invest in streetscape improvements and plant trees. Thanks to Mr. L'Enfant, the area is blessed with a fantastic urban design setting with wide avenues and streets. But, for decades, we haven't made any investments in them to keep them up and make them attractive. It is time to reinvest in these basic governmental services.

And, as we said in our plan and have shared with DOT Director Tangherlini, after decades of inertia and millions of dollars in lost time it is time to fix the intersection of New York Avenue and I-395.

So, there is much to do. It is time to start. The approval of the Wax Museum RFP for housing and neighborhood retail redevelopment is a critical part of that beginning. We urge you to approve the RFP as proposed.

Thank you for allowing me to share these observations. I am available to answer any questions.