

June 30, 2004

Committee on Consumer and Regulatory Affairs
Sharon Ambrose, Chairman

Gallery Place Project Graphics Act of 2003 - Bill 15-313

Committee of 100 on the Federal City

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today, on behalf of the Committee of 100 on the Federal City, which for eighty years has offered independent and informed comment on planning, preservation, and development in the Nation's capital.

The Committee of 100 and many other organizations offered testimony at the time special signs legislation was being considered. We cited the billboard-free history of our city, and its contribution to the scenic vistas that residents and tourists alike celebrate. By a single vote, that issue went in favor of introduction of these oversized billboards now making their "contribution" to downtown. Even then, however, Council was concerned about flashing signs, moving parts, and other inappropriate gimmicks.

Now we have those so-special signs, and thanks to advertising on WMATA buses, we can also travel across town watching signs advertising FCUK. The further devaluation of the visual landscape considered in this bill marks a continuing erosion in the protections our community has relied upon.

The language of the bill is wide open: there are no constraints on the worst categories of signage, no limits on what technology might offer: moving, blinking, jarring images. No limits on the dimensions of signage. Structural projections that can extend 48" into the street. Banners of unlimited size. Will allowing interactive terminals include game-playing? Risk-taking? It replaces transparent glass with huge posters hung just inside the surface. The visual reality is exchanged for artificial advertising panels. Why in the name of liveliness do you veil human activity?

We are told these excesses are needed to make the Gallery Place facility successful – or more successful. I would posit that these very artificial and intrusive gimmicks further limit the potential for success. They will cheapen the character of the immediate area, turning preserved structures into pedestals for huge jumbotrons of advertising and promotion. The character of this project, in which the public has a great stake, will not be that of the world-class capital city we keep promoting, but something closer to hucksterism.

Once you set the precedent here, you will be as powerless to deny it elsewhere as you are in controlling content. Surely this cannot be what you want for our city.

We ask you to reject what is before you today and ask the developer to return with some vastly more limited proposal - perhaps only for the alley area off 7th Street.

Barbara Zartman, Chairman