

March 10, 2005

Testimony – The Committee of 100 on the Federal City

Council of the District of Columbia
Committee of the Whole
Oversight Hearings on the Office of Planning

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City has for more than eighty years offered informed commentary on issues of planning and preservation in the District of Columbia. The collective experience and expertise of our members provides an independent voice for the interests of the people of the District as well as its government agencies.

Before speaking about the Office of Planning itself, we wish to note the outstanding achievements of the Historic Preservation Office and its HPRB in monitoring the well-being and growth of historic districts and properties. We thought we had persuaded Deputy Mayor Eric Price to request additional funding for HPO staff to support the extraordinary amount of work handled by that office but then there was transition. We again make that argument.

We also wish Council would clearly establish that District agencies, including particularly DDOT, must undertake the same reviews (with the same controls) as any business or resident in a historic district must do. The Mayor has indicated to community groups that he would not oppose such steps; we urge Council to make them a requirement. And lastly, we are ever wary about intervention in the due process established for protection of historic properties and landmarks.

There is much to be proud of in the work of the Office of Planning. It is hard to imagine a more challenging period for professional planners than the one that Washington has faced during the past half dozen years. We have worked with OP on various task forces, and look forward to still closer involvement on the OCC site and the Anacostia projects. Yet we have concerns in some areas, among them:

- the high percentage of consultants and out-of-town staff unfamiliar with the District and its cultures
- the increasing use of PUDs (even in campus plans, established independently of PUDs)
- planning by zoning, which undermines the very process of planning itself.

But our biggest concern is the most fundamental. It is imperative that we have facts on which to base planning: Comprehensive Plan revisions were to have extensive analyses on which to base judgments. This was a promise made when OP sought C100's support for the delay of Comprehensive Plan revisions. Now, years later, with resources provided to OP by this Council, we are well into the revision process, but the factual analyses and land-use maps have not yet been provided.

Perhaps the clearest example of how bad data leads to bad decisions are the basic building blocks of demographic data that all parts of civic planning are based upon: the 2000 Census. Yet into those building blocks were dropped some 70,000 people who may not ever have considered themselves residents of DC: undergraduate students at colleges and universities. In what I believe is a violation of our Human Rights Act, these persons alone – because of their matriculation status – were not provided the opportunity to declare their residence as either being in their home state or the District. Rather, they were dropped by the thousands into individual Census tracts.

This is no philosophical issue. The students nearly all qualify as financially needy because they normally have little earned income. Their inclusion distorts every analysis of social need in the District. They are included in analyses of poverty populations needing (subsidized) shelter; they are included in assessment of potential for homelessness in the District.

When asked about simply disaggregating this population in analyses, OP indicates it would be discriminatory against students. But surely we regularly see subsets of population by age, gender, race; none of these are seen as acts of discrimination. Surely we can arrange for more revealing analyses. To do so will provide Council with a far better sense of real needs of people truly in poverty.

Council should certainly require it before being asked to accept proposals for expanding individual programs. And any recommendation for increasing District population by 100,000 must make clear how much undergraduate expansion is being encouraged in the mix.

Surely the work of revising the Comprehensive Plan must have better data.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment. I would be pleased to answer any questions.

Barbara Zartman, Chairman