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TESTIMONY OF
DC PRESERVATION LEAGUE
before
THE COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE
VINCENT C. GRAY, COMMITTEE CHAIR
on
FISCAL YEAR 2009 BUDGET
FOR THE OFFICE OF PLANNING
FRIDAY, APRIL 18, 2008
2:00 PM

Chairman Gray and members of the Committee:

My name is John Bellingham. I am the President of the Board of Trustees of the DC Preservation League, and I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you on behalf of the organization today.

First, I'd like to commend Mr. Maloney and the entire Historic Preservation Office (HPO) staff on the tremendous work they do in protecting the historic resources of this city and ensuring that they contribute to its economic vitality.

We also commend this Council and the Mayor's Office for their ongoing support for the cause of preservation.

For the past 7 years, DCPL has advocated that the DC Historic Preservation Office should be provided sufficient resources and staffing to manage the office's increasing project review workload. We are very pleased that HPO was able to hire 4 new staff members during this fiscal year—this staff was desperately needed to review the high volume of construction activity downtown and in the District's 27 neighborhood historic districts.

It is DCPL's position that even the current HPO staffing level will not be enough in the future. Private development activity and federal development continue to take up the majority of HPO staff time. New initiatives such as the School Modernization Project, Preservation Review of Municipal Buildings, and the Green Building Act put forth by the Fenty administration, represent substantial additional burdens for the overworked staff.

Last year, the Council Chair asked about the functions of other State Historic Preservation Offices across the country. One of the most important functions involves the production of landmark nominations. Recently, DCPL has taken on the primary role of researching, preparing and submitting landmark nominations because HPO simply does not have the staff time available for this task. These nominations are complex and require specialized expertise. Several Council members have raised the issue of the appropriateness of "third

party” nominations. DCPL will continue to pursue designations of buildings as allowed by the preservation law but maintain that if properly staffed, this issue could be addressed as a primary function of HPO.

Increased staffing levels in the future is also necessary to implement new initiatives and services that are necessary to promote goodwill as part of the preservation process for both the development community and the citizens of the District of Columbia.

DCPL is pleased that HPO exceeded its goal by granting almost \$900,000 of the Historic Homeowner Grant Program in its first year. It took several years to get this initiative off the ground, and from the response received from the pilot program in the Anacostia Historic District, this program will be an asset to many homeowners in the 12 targeted historic districts. DCPL would like some clarification as to the current budget showing an appropriation of \$501,000. We have been told by Ed Geifer, the Office of Planning’s Associate Director for Strategic Operations and Finance that the full appropriation is in the budget, but it is not clear to us where that particular line item is. This program is meant to last five-years and expend \$6.25 million dollars to low and moderate income homeowners. We hope the Council will stand by its previous commitment to this important program and ensure that the monies are appropriated in this budget.

DCPL would also like to ask that the Council consider adding an additional \$24,000 to the budget to video tape the Historic Preservation Review Board Hearings. The hearings are currently transcribed but videotaping the proceedings would benefit the community at large as they try to understand the presentations made to the board as well as the decisions made by the board.

Finally, over the past several years, DCPL has testified about the need for legal support in the Office of Planning. HPO recently underwent a risk assessment this last year and it was evident that the office’s biggest risk is litigation. The staff members of HPO are not attorneys and they should not be without legal representation from an attorney with knowledge of preservation law as a full time employee of the District government or by an attorney under contract for this purpose.

The Historic Preservation Office is uniquely positioned at the intersection of development and preservation interests. The staff works tremendous hours to keep project review, compliance activity, and federal tax incentive projects moving forward. It cannot be expected, however, that staff will be able to continue to meet increasing pressures without adequate support. It is in the District’s best interest that the Council and Mayor provide for appropriate funding for HPO in the future.

Thank You,

John Bellingham