Testimony of Patrick J. Lally, Trustee
Committee of 100 on the Federal City
Before the
Board of Zoning Adjustment
BP Amoco Gas Station – 300-Block of H Street, NE
June 19, 2001

Thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon. The Committee of 100 is the city's oldest and largest planning advocacy organization, and as such is particularly concerned with the adverse effect the proposed BP Amoco expansion would have on the H Street Corridor and its "gateway" block. Any further incursion for gas station use along the commercial frontage of the 300-Block of H Street, NE would permanently alter this section of the corridor, and prevent what this part of H Street really needs -- the neighborhood-serving commercial and retail economic development catalyst long envisioned as the "H Street Gateway" project. The Committee urges you to oppose BP Amoco's proposal, and in so doing, support vigorously all valid planning efforts to revitalize the corridor.

Few of the District's traditional commercial corridors were damaged as heavily by the 1968 riots as H Street, NE, and even fewer have continued such a precipitous downward spiral of disinvestment. As a result, the corridor's remaining businesses, several new promising enterprises, and fragile adjacent residential neighborhoods are inordinately threatened by the expansion of a gas station that the Comprehensive Plan and its Ward Six Element discourage. Furthermore, the Plan encourages needed neighborhood-serving pedestrian-friendly retail along the street, and recognizes the many benefits of a "gateway project." An expanded fueling facility largely serving commuters to the central business district is eminently better suited elsewhere, and should not jeopardize a crucial part of H Street that sets the tone for future planning goals along the Corridor.

Pursuant to this Board's request that the BP Amoco Corporation work "with the community" in achieving consensus on the design of an expanded gas station, on January 10th, the Committee of 100 – along with nine other representatives of the community – put forth its principles for making the project work better largely based on the Office of Planning analysis of the project. Those organizations are: Scenic America; the DC Preservation League; the Committee of 100 on the Federal City; the National Trust for Historic Preservation; Residents of Square 776; the Capitol Hill Restoration Society; Stanton Park Neighborhood Association; Near Northeast Citizens Against Crime and Drugs; and the H Street Association of Merchants and Professionals. BP Amoco has not worked to meet the concerns of these organizations, and the current design does not even begin to accommodate the community's wishes. That is why the Office of Planning has again criticized the project in its most recent analysis of BP Amoco's proposal.

These are the objectives that the organizations outlined:

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a) Locate the convenience store - preferably a 2-3 story structure -at the corner of Third and H Street with a pedestrian entrance from the H Street sidewalk. Buildings at corners are especially important and effective in reinforcing the urban streetscape.

b) Retain and re-use any existing historic structures in the redevelopment proposal, especially 316 H Street, NE.

c) Install the pumps and canopy behind the building, parallel to Third Street, with appropriate screening from adjacent residential properties.

d) Maintain and improve the existing system of alleys to facilitate vehicular circulation to the gas station and residential structures. Reduce to a minimum any curb cuts.

e) Ensure that if there is a car wash - it is oriented and designed to significantly minimize disruption to adjacent residential properties.

f) Develop commercial retail or office uses on that portion of the site between the alley and Fourth St. or facilitate appropriate commercial development of the site.

As currently proposed, the project still adversely affects the dominant scale and pattern of the H Street Commercial Corridor. It will not provide net benefits to either the Corridor or the surrounding residential community.

Members of the Board, this gateway block is even more important to this part of the city in light of certain current and future developments affecting H Street. Over the next ten years new jobs on the corridor, a thriving downtown, the CSX telecommunications right-of-way, a new convention center, the relocation of the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, and the Union Station Overlay's proposed 10 million square feet of high-density commercial development will place an exponentially greater emphasis on the corridor's commuter-serving role. Suburban-style strip stores, auto parts facilities, gas stations, and other out-of-context, inappropriate uses have begun to proliferate the corridor, and threaten to destabilize small businesses that serve people who live there. The time is now to foster the businesses that strengthen and promote the overall residential and retail core of Near Northeast before H Street becomes nothing more than another inner-city highway like New York Avenue, NE.

The corridor's principal eleven blocks warrant a comprehensive planning approach toward revitalization that the Board can help provide in denying BP Amoco's request. As "gateways" and various economic redevelopment projects begin to transform other parts of the city, H Street continues to languish, and now may forever lose its own gateway to a gas station.

The Board of Zoning Adjustment has provided BP Amoco ample opportunity to redesign this project with extensive comments from the Office of Planning and the community. The current proposal before the Board again fails to meet the test of that guidance, and the Committee of 100 urges you to deny the applicant's request.

Thank you.