
Letter in Support of Making Washington D.C. an Affordable, Vibrant, Sustainable City

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To DCOZ - ZC Submissions (DCOZ) <DCOZ-ZCSubmissions@dc.gov>

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Members of the Zoning Commission,

I write to urge a bold re-thinking of our city's skyline: specifically, the elimination of city-wide height restrictions in Washington, D.C. Such a shift would unlock multiple major benefits for affordability, walkability, sustainability, and social harmony — all of which align with the long-term interests of our city and its residents.

Affordability

Height limits act as a direct ceiling on supply: by restricting how tall buildings can go, they artificially constrain how many housing units can be developed on a parcel of land.

In the D.C. context, the federal Height of Buildings Act of 1910 limits downtown building height to the width of the street plus 20 feet (and often to ~130 feet on major commercial streets). This constraint has resulted in downtown D.C. being effectively full, unable to expand vertically despite strong demand, which pushes development (and price inflation) into adjacent neighborhoods. As cities in the DMV rezone for more apartments, DC residents are incentivized to leave to the suburbs, reducing the tax base and economic activity.

When supply is artificially limited, rents and home-prices rise—not because of any intrinsic benefit but because of regulatory constraint. Relaxing height restrictions would allow more units, more competition, and therefore downward pressure on housing costs. By enabling more housing units (especially in high-demand central locations), we allow more of our workforce to live near jobs and transit, reducing commuting costs and freeing up income.

Walkability & Urban Vitality

Higher and denser development tends to make neighborhoods more walkable and vibrant. Denser populations support more local businesses, public transit, and mixed-use amenities; residents have shorter distances to groceries, schools, cafes, and jobs. One zoning review argued that more flexible zoning — which includes allowing greater height — creates more sustainable, dense, and walkable communities.

When height restrictions force outward sprawl, it undermines walkability: farther distances, longer commutes, more reliance on cars. By removing the ceiling on height across the city, D.C.

can concentrate more development where infrastructure already exists, thereby creating richer local neighborhood life, more choices, and better access to amenities.

From a sustainability perspective, taller and denser urban form often means lower per-capita land consumption and reduced sprawl into natural areas. Moreover, denser development near transit reduces vehicle miles travelled, which lowers greenhouse-gas emissions and air pollution. While tall buildings present some design challenges (e.g., shadowing, micro-climates) they also offer opportunities for efficient land use and infrastructure use. In short, eliminating height caps helps D.C. build a more sustainable future, where we house more people with less sprawl, less car-dependence, and more efficient use of land and infrastructure.

Height restrictions often have the effect of exclusion: by limiting what can be built, they raise prices and exclude lower-income people from high-amenity neighborhoods. By enabling taller buildings city-wide, we open up more housing opportunities across income levels, integrate more households into walkable, amenity-rich neighborhoods, and reduce the segregation effects that restrictive zoning produces. In addition, when more people can live near each other and near transit and jobs, it strengthens the social fabric, promotes more mixing of incomes and backgrounds, and builds the kind of diverse, vibrant city we aspire to.

In conclusion, I respectfully urge the Zoning Commission to adopt a policy of no city-wide height restrictions, thereby empowering individual sites and neighborhoods to deliver their own appropriate scale of development through design review rather than uniform suppression. By doing so, D.C. can achieve greater affordability for working families, richer walkable neighborhoods, a more sustainable urban form, and greater social equity. Thank you for your consideration.

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