

There's Nothing Sacred About the Building Height Limit

Whenever anyone suggests revisiting the District's building height limits, the almost universal response is that heights permitted by zoning laws are both sufficient and sacred.

Although the District's building height regulations are expressed quantitatively, they in fact reflect value judgments enacted into law almost a century ago. Today, aspects of those judgments deserve reconsideration.

At the end of the 19th century, value judgments leading to legislation were based in part on history and building traditions dating to the founding of the city, to the wishes of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson to keep the American capital a "low city." But those judgments were also reinforced by construction of a particular building.

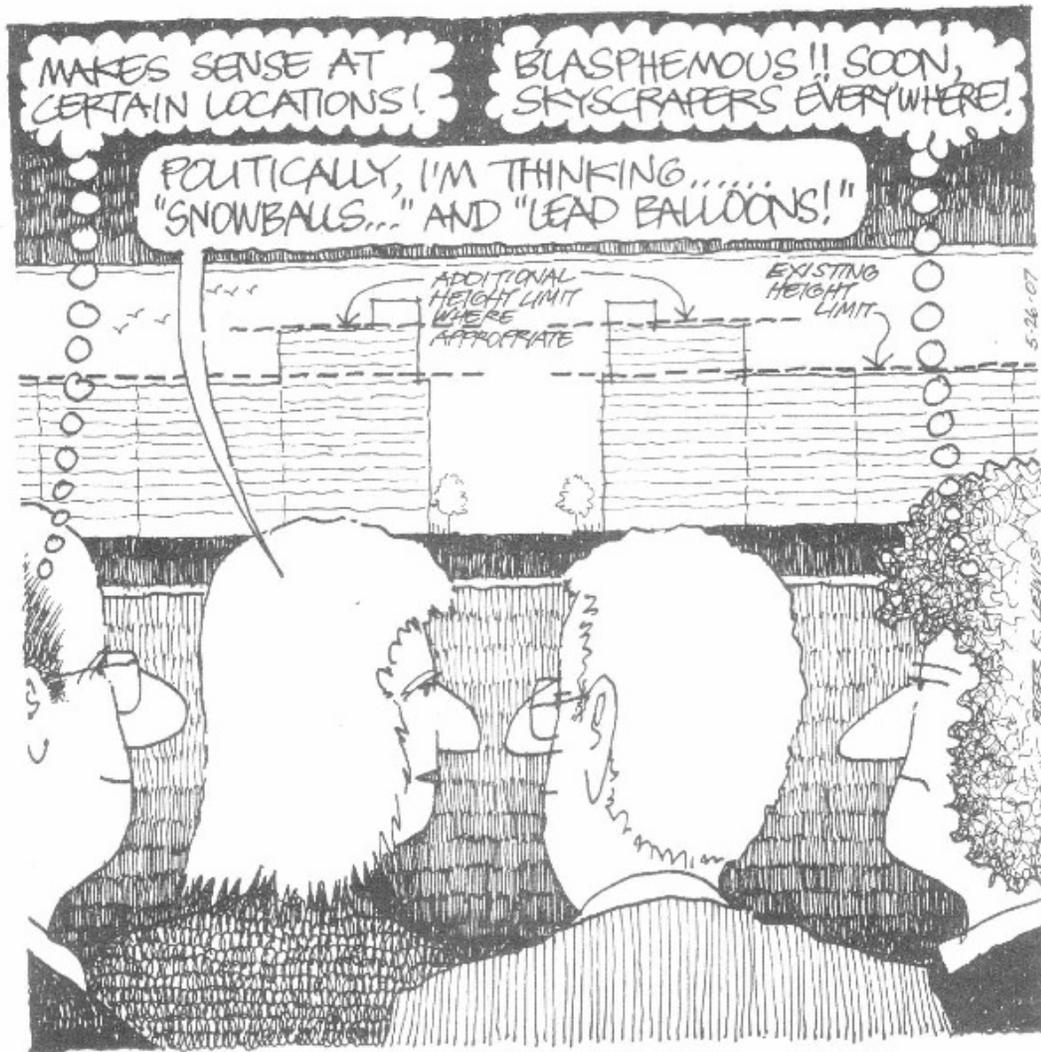
In 1894, the 160-foot-tall Cairo apartment building was erected on Q Street NW. It seems that almost everyone thought it looked unduly intrusive and out of scale with its rowhouse neighborhood. The negative public response to the Cairo eventually motivated Congress to pass the Height Act of 1910, which relates allowable building heights to street widths.

People offended by the Cairo made a definitive value judgment: The building fabric of Washington was to remain uniformly low-rise. There would be a memorable skyline but no skyscrapers. **The Height Act of 1910** ensured that Washington's streets and neighborhoods would remain airy, sunlit and protected from soaring buildings that are inharmonious with their surroundings.

The law stipulates that a building's height generally should not exceed the visual width of the street, as measured from building face to building face, plus 20 feet. In commercial zones not requiring buildings to be set back from the front property line, the visual street width typically is the same as the right-of-way width.

In effect, with downtown street widths rarely exceeding 90 feet to 110 feet, D.C. buildings can rise no more than 110 feet or 130 feet, except on Pennsylvania Avenue, where 160 feet is allowed. **Only mechanical penthouses, antennas and purely ornamental features, such as spires, cupolas and steeples, can rise above a building's height limit.**

Many years ago, I suggested in this column that **there could be certain places in the District where height restrictions might be relaxed, where taller buildings could make aesthetic, functional and economic sense.** With rigorous analysis and fine-grain, targeted planning, not broad-brush rezoning, the city could identify sites well suited for more intense use, increased density and higher structures.



Site suitability for greater building height, I wrote, would depend on many factors: location and community compatibility, topography, favorable views and view preservation, access to transit, road network sufficiency, and availability of public services. Perhaps there would be places where taller, more iconic edifices could serve as landmarks. A bit more variation in building heights, and slightly more height for buildings framing key intersections, could enhance the look of many streetscapes.

In Bethesda's Woodmont Triangle, 174' is the maximum height allowed, not 175', as though anyone could perceive a 1' difference. The fact is almost all numbers in zoning are arbitrary. They are not true mathematical or scientific constants like π (3.14159... the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter) or g (32 feet per second per second -- the acceleration of gravity in Newton's Laws of Motion) or c (186 thousand miles per second, the speed of light and Einstein's Theory of Relativity)

Metro is a horizontal elevator. Usage is a function of convenience which is proximity of sources and destinations for pedestrians. Increasing building height, subject to good design, is a requirement, not an option.

Washington Post columnist **Jonathan Yardley** took issue with my suggestion. Shortly after my column appeared, he wrote that any exception to D.C. height limits, no matter why or where, would open a door that should never be opened. He feared that such

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exceptions soon would become the rule, jeopardizing the city's historically unique scale and promising to make Washington a city of high-rises.

In an article in The Post's Metro section earlier this month, staff writer **Paul Schwartzman** reported on yet another suggestion for taller buildings in appropriate D.C. locations, this time by **Brookings Institution** visiting fellow **Christopher Leinberger**.

Leinberger's argument is essentially economic. Land available for development of commercial and residential space in the District is increasingly in short supply, while rising demand for space is forcing real estate prices up at an accelerating pace. Thus, he says, raising the height limit could increase the supply of developable space and ease pressure on prices. It also could help the District compete with suburbs for businesses and residents.

Leinberger's recent proposal, Schwartzman noted, also elicited skeptical reactions, not unlike Yardley's reaction to my suggestion many years before.

Let's face it: Washingtonians continue to believe strongly not only that height limits are sacrosanct, but also that any attempt to change them is heresy.

Yet do we have to be so dogmatic and dismiss completely even the possibility of prudent height exceptions? **Why assume that we are incapable of preserving the dominant low-rise character of Washington while allowing taller buildings in well-chosen places?**

I continue to believe it's at least worth the effort to study the District and **identify specific sites where development of taller buildings could be desirable**. Of course, as hard as finding appropriate sites for taller buildings might be, the planning challenge pales in comparison to the political challenge.

*9/15/03 In a conversation with me at the National Building Museum, **Charlie Atherton**, Secretary to the Commission on Fine Arts, the design review body for the federal government, said that there has been much debate about the height limit in DC. I said a solution is to keep the height limit for the L'Enfant Plan, and let the rest go. Charlie said this reminded him of something famous Boston architect **Wm Perry** said in 1961 or so to the Commission -- he envisioned the L'Enfant Plan area as a "meadow" with just the Capitol and the Washington Monument standing out surrounded by a "forest" (taller buildings on the perimeter.) — And that is long before Metro!*

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