

# ARCHITECT

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS

| From: [ARCHITECT 2013](#)

Posted on: November 1, 2013

**CONGRESS**

## AIA|DC Supports Changing Height Act in Congress

The local chapter of the American Institute of Architects sides with the city over possible changes to the Height Act in Washington, D.C.

By [Caroline Massie](#)



F Street NW in downtown D.C.

Credit: Flickr/Mr. T in DC

The skyline of Washington, D.C. has long labored under a law that stunts the vertical growth of its buildings. However, the city could see some architectural change now that the law is being reconsidered. Debates have heated in the last two months between opponents of reform, such as the National Capital Planning

Commission (NCPC), and proponents of change—a group that now includes the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA).

Earlier this month, AIA|DC joined the debate by drafting a letter to NCPC Chairman L. Preston Bryant, Jr. Signed by AIA|DC president David Haresign, FAIA, and executive director Mary Fitch, Hon. AIA, the letter outlines the organization's dissatisfaction with the Height Act.

The 1910 Height of Buildings Act places restrictions on the height of urban structures depending on location and zoning. The dialogue about potential reform began in November 2012 when Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) requested that the NCPC and the D.C. Office of Planning review the law, provided that the House of Representatives consider both proposals equally.

The AIA|DC letter to the NCPC argues that the law, which was written to ensure the safety of D.C. residents against threats of fire, is now outdated. The city has enacted several building codes and zoning laws in the last century that “in many cases provide more protection to the city's unique skyline than the Act does,” the letter reads.



The Cairo, the tallest residential building in the District, prompted Congress to pass the Height Act of 1910.

Credit: Flickr/Adam Gerard

Haresign and Fitch instead propose that the NCPC focus its efforts on preservation of key urban areas, including the Monumental Core and other historic view-sheds, rather than the entire city. Vertical growth may be most appropriate in the boundaries of the city. The D.C. Office of Planning also



supports the modification of the Height Act under the following conditions:

1. Maintenance of the horizontal L'Enfant City skyline
2. Preservation of views of historic monuments and structures
3. Reduction of negative impacts on significant historic resources

The District's proposal recommends major changes to the current policy by revising the formula that calculates the heights of downtown buildings. In areas outside L'Enfant City, the District endorses lifting the Height Act completely. The proposal suggests that taller structures will alleviate high price demands with the current supply and increase accommodate future growth.

The AIA|DC further requests that the NCPC conduct a more in-depth revision of the city's architecture in the future, with sufficient public input. Haresign and Fitch conclude their letter by stating that with respect to the historically-stunted DC skyline, taller urban buildings may provide "an interesting counterpoint and add visual interest."

At the D.C. Council hearing this week, Office of Planning director Harriet Tregoning spoke about the limitations on economic opportunity the city could face in continuing to adhere to the Height Act.

"Not changing is not an option," says Tregoning. "We are changing. The question is, are we going to allow these changes to just roll on, and let housing prices get higher and higher and do nothing about it? Or are we going to try and be the city where people can continue to live, and try to address what we think are real capacity constraints?"

Opponents of reform to the Height Act argued at the Council hearing that taller buildings would obstruct the historic nature of the city with corporate skyscrapers. "It hasn't been demonstrated that we need to increase the height limits," said Ward 4 Council member Muriel Boswer. Boswer stated her concerns about current development projects blocking iconic views, adding that reform of the Height Act would exacerbate this problem.

Other citizens spoke about increased issues of unemployment and poverty with increased density in concentrated regions of the district. However, *Slate* financial blogger [Matthew Yglesias](#) and others argue that the economic benefits to removing the Height Act could lead to lower taxes and higher revenue. Writing for the *Washington City Paper*, [Lydia DePillis](#) (now a blogger for *The Washington Post*) takes on the Height Act from a planning perspective, arguing that building residential areas with combinations of parks and tall buildings will draw new businesses to commercial centers. Variety of building height and green space would invite architectural creativity.

Since the D.C. Council has no direct impact on this issue, opponents of reform urged the Council at the hearing to pass a resolution stating its disagreement to the proposal of the Office of Planning. The NCPC, in collaboration with city officials, must submit a final proposal to Congress, where further action may be taken.