

The Building Height Limit Debate In Washington, DC

An Examination of the history of the building height limits in Washington, DC, as well as an exploration of the current proposed changes to the City's building height limits.

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Goal of This Project

To examine the building height limit debate in Washington, DC, using ArcGIS Online to explore the history, the current reality and the proposed changes the City's height restrictions.

History of Building Restrictions in Washington, DC

- The current height restrictions are not related to keeping buildings lower than the Capitol.
- The Restrictions were enacted as a reaction to the 164 foot Cairo apartment building; built in 1894.
- The height restrictions are based on the width of the street that a building faces.

The Cairo Apartment Building – Built in 1894



<http://stlouispatina.com/cairo-apartments/>



JACQUELYN MARTIN / AP

- The Commissioners of the District, decided that no commercial building could be taller than 110 feet and no residential building could be taller than 90 feet, or taller than the size of the width of the street, whichever was smaller.
- The law was later amended by the Heights of Buildings Act of 1910.
- This amendment stated that no building could be taller than the width of the adjacent street, plus 20 feet.
- In addition, buildings adjacent to residential streets could not be taller than 90 feet and buildings adjacent to a commercial street could not be taller than 130 feet.

- There is an exception in the law for buildings along Pennsylvania Avenue between the White House and the Capitol.
- Buildings can reach a height of 160 feet, along this stretch of Pennsylvania Avenue.
- This exception was built into the law to accommodate the Raleigh Hotel, which was rebuilt in 1911.
- The Raleigh Hotel no longer exists, but the exception to the citywide height limit remains.

The Raleigh Hotel – Built in 1911

- Congress changed the height limit for Pennsylvania Avenue from 130 feet to 160 feet in 1910, in order to accommodate the Raleigh Hotel's Builder.



<http://greatergreaterwashington.org>



- There are exceptions in the law for spires, towers, domes, minarets, pinnacles, penthouses over elevator shafts, chimneys, smokestacks, and fire sprinkler tanks that are approved by the Mayor of the District of Columbia.
- Additional height exceptions were made for the National Cathedral, the National Shrine of the Basilica, The Old Post Office and One Franklin Square.

Buildings That Currently Exceed the Building Height Limits

- One Franklin Square
- The US Capitol
- The Washington Monument
- The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception
- The National Cathedral
- The Old Post Office

The Old Post Office
Office



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Post_Office_Pavilion

The National Cathedral



<http://www.worldtourismplace.com>

Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception



<http://m.wikitravel.org>

The Washington Monument



AP Photo/Ron Edmonds

The National Capitol



<http://www.outsidethebeltway.com>

One Franklin Square



<http://beyonddc.com>

Arguments in Favor

- The District is running out of space in the downtown central business district to build.
- Driving up rents and making it more difficult to attract businesses, residents and tourists to the city.
- Would help to compete with MD and VA for jobs.
- More revenue for the city.
- Could encourage “Smart Growth”.

Arguments Against

- More crowds.
- More Traffic.
- Less Parking.
- Blocked viewsheds.
- Historic preservation.
- Worse aesthetics.
- Could lose some quiet low density neighborhoods.

Brookland

The type of low density neighborhoods that many residents hope to preserve.



<http://www.wheretoliveindc.com>

Georgetown



<http://www.123rf.com>

Capitol Hill



<http://www.slowtrav.com>

Current Proposals

- A Congressional Commission, headed by Darrel Issa, met on December 2nd to consider two sets of recommendations.
- Mayor Grey and the DC Office of Planning, who are in favor of altering the building height restrictions.
- The National Capitol Planning Commission, who is in favor of keeping the height restrictions as they currently exist.
- No Decisions were made, but the topic will continue to be explored moving forward.

The District's Office of Planning Recommendations:

- Use a ratio of 1: 1.25 for street width to building height in the L'Enfant Plan.
- This would result in a new maximum building height of 200 feet for 160-foot wide streets.
- Allow for increases to building heights for targeted areas outside the L'Enfant City.
- These areas would be decided as necessary by the City, by way of the District's current zoning change process.

- Allow for rooftop mechanical penthouses to be converted into livable structures that would not exceed 20 feet or one story.
- Changes outside of the L'Enfant Plan would consider all Federal interests of security and historic preservation.
- All changes would also need to be approved by the NCPC and Congress.

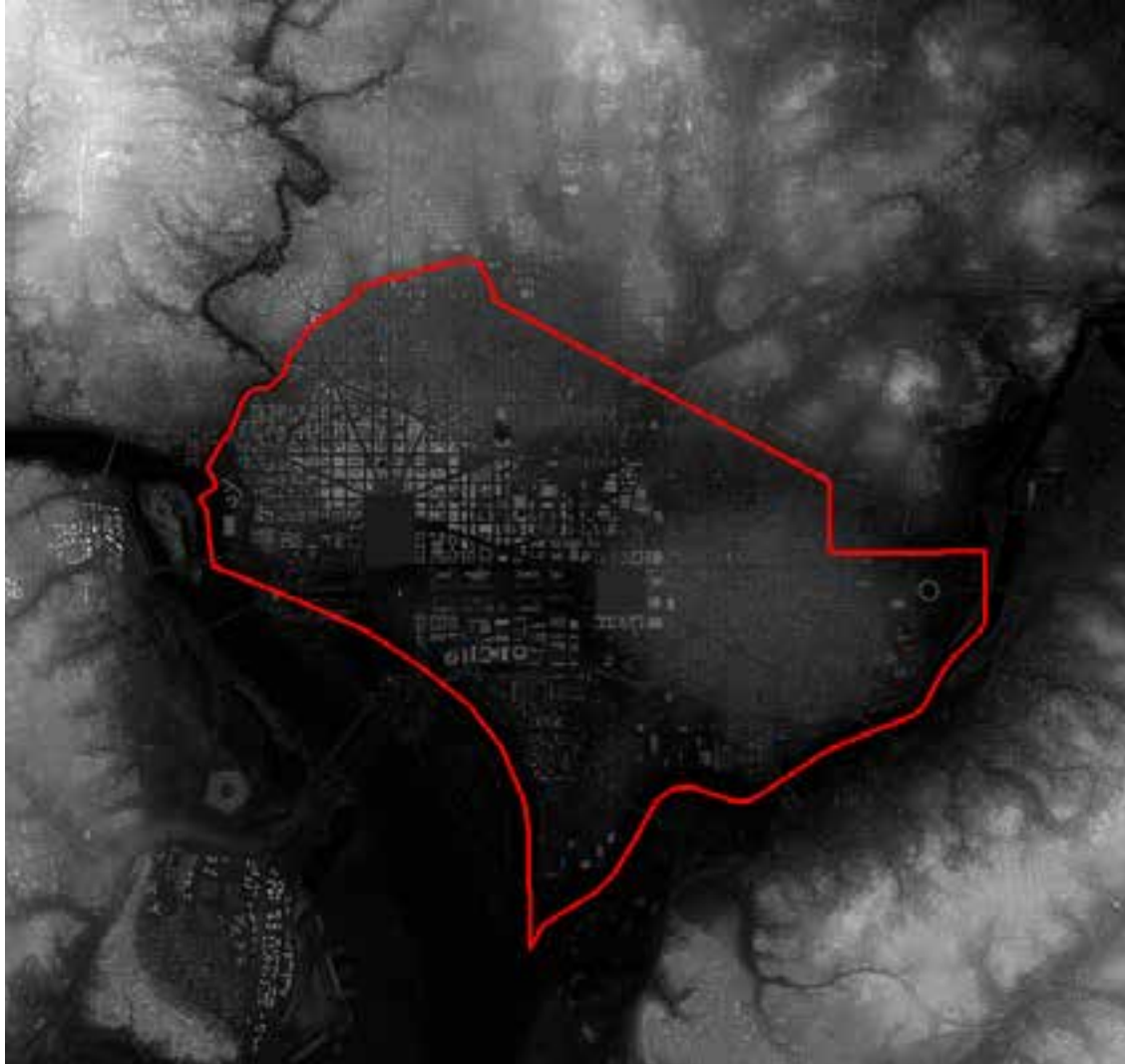
The NCPC Recommendations:

- Keep all building height restrictions in the L'Enfant City as they currently exist.
- Consider taller buildings in targeted areas outside of the L'Enfant City. However, any of these targeted changes would need to be approved by NCPC and Congress.
- Allow rooftop equipment and mechanical penthouses to be converted into living spaces, that will not exceed 20 feet or one story.

The biggest concern of the NCPC

- Viewsheds in and around the National Mall.
- Preserving the low profile of the area inside the old L'Enfant plan.
- Historic Preservation.

The topographic bowl that surrounds the old city, creates many of the views of downtown and the monuments.



The type of viewsheds, around the outside of the L'Enfant Plan, that might be affected by raising building heights.







Viewsheds on the Mall itself should not be significantly affected. The buildings of downtown are mostly obscured on the National Mall.









Like the Mall, views from Arlington National Cemetery should not be negatively impacted by slight increases to building heights in the L'Enfant Plan.



To explore the Washington, DC building height debate further, go to the NLT's ArcGIS presentation at:

<http://bit.ly/1bqxU6m>

and NLT's ArcGIS Online map:

<http://bit.ly/18NTwvP>

Special thanks and credit to DC GIS, whose data catalog made this project possible:

<http://dcatlas.dcgis.dc.gov/catalog/>

For a more detailed study of the building height debate see the District of Columbia Government's Office of Planning Report at:

<http://planning.dc.gov/DC/Planning/About+Planning/News+Room/DC+Office+of+Planning+Announces+Release+of+District%27s+Final+Height+Act+Recommendations>