

Washington Times

Monday, October 13, 2008

Land scarcity sparks tower talk

ASSOCIATED PRESS

As vacant land disappears in the District, concerns about high real estate prices are sparking a debate on whether to allow taller buildings, which is prevented under a century-old law.

Land scarcity and concerns about the need to curb suburban sprawl have even spawned talk of eventually bringing office towers to a city long known for its picturesque views, sunlit streets and compact buildings.

Within 15 years, according to one analysis, no more space will be available in a 3.5-mile stretch from Georgetown to Capitol Hill.

Christopher Leinberger, a land-use strategist and visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution, warns that unless more room is found, the artificial cap on space will further increase downtown real estate prices, which rank second behind Manhattan's.

As a result, only the wealthiest businesses and residents will be able to stay in the District, stunting the city's tax base.

Contrary to popular lore, the city's low skyline has nothing to do with preserving the prominence of the Washington Monument's 555-foot stone obelisk.

In fact, Congress - which has oversight over the capital - passed the Height Act of 1910 in response to residents' outrage over the 14-story Cairo apartment building erected in 1894 near Dupont Circle, towering over nearby row houses. Besides concerns about aesthetics, there also was a desire to prevent buildings from becoming too tall for fire-engine ladders.

The law limits building heights to the width of the adjacent street plus 20 feet. There have been several exceptions to allow for construction of the National Cathedral and Georgetown University Hospital. Otherwise, the Height Act has capped most buildings at 130 feet, though heights of 160 feet are permitted on sections of Pennsylvania Avenue Northwest.

For plenty of influential D.C. planners, the idea of altering the city's skyline borders on blasphemy.

"I think it's very important to recognize the real uniqueness of Washington's physical character, certainly compared to any other American city," said Thomas

Luebke, the secretary of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts. He called the city's skyline "a national symbol."

Critics also include Marcel Acosta, executive director of the National Capital Planning Commission. He argues that unlike parts of New York and Chicago, the absence of tall buildings on D.C. streets allows for plentiful sunlight and a more welcoming experience for pedestrians.

"In a world of cookie-cutter cities, this is one of our great advantages," he said.

Gerry Widdicombe, director of economic development for the Downtown D.C. Business Improvement District, said the city's height restrictions will get increasing attention as space for new development continues to shrink.

The nonprofit group projects that 57 million square feet of space remains for offices, shops and apartments in the central downtown. Whether the space vanishes in 15 years, or perhaps 30, could depend on how badly the city is affected by an economic downturn, Mr. Widdicombe said.

The District wouldn't be the first traditionally low-lying city to see its skyline go vertical. Many European cities have created high-rise districts, such as London's Canary Wharf. And the Paris city council recently voted to consider erecting tall buildings on the edge of the French capital.

In the U.S., Los Angeles limited most buildings to 150 feet until 1957 because of concerns about earthquakes, said Witold Rybczynski, an architecture critic and professor at the University of Pennsylvania. And Philadelphia had an informal rule until the 1980s that buildings remain lower than the 548-foot William Penn statue atop City Hall.

Besides lowering prices and slowing sprawl, proponents of taller buildings in the District say another upside would be eliminating the "Washington Box" - low ceilings and square, unimaginative facades that seek to use every possible square foot rather than dazzling passers-by with elegant designs.

David Garrison, who has lived in District for 30 years, is among those who complain about the drab architecture, particularly along the high-powered K Street corridor. Yet for him, tall buildings marring the skyline would be even worse.

"I like the look and feel of the city," he said. "I'm used to it."

Whayne Quin, a lawyer who specializes in land use and urban planning, points to poor architecture, not the city's height limit, for the boxy buildings. He says many newer buildings are an improvement over those built decades ago.

Though Mr. Quin opposes wholesale changes to the height limit, he is open to small modifications. He said one possibility is higher density near mass transit, such as Metrorail.

Mr. Leinberger thinks tinkering with the Height Act to allow a few extra floors is not the solution.

"The options are either out or up," he said. "At some point, either we're going to deal with it, or our children are going to deal with it."