

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**  
**Office of Planning**



Public Hearing  
On  
Bill 23-233, the “Diverse Washingtonians Commemorative Works Amendment Act of 2019”  
and  
Bill 23-234, the “Advisory Commission on Monuments, Markers, and Symbols Establishment Act of  
2019”

Testimony of  
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Before the  
Committee of the Whole  
Chairman Phil Mendelson

John A. Wilson Building  
Room 120  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20004

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10:30 a.m.

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson and members and staff of the Committee of the Whole. I am Andrew Trueblood, Director of the DC Office of Planning. Today I am pleased to testify on Bill 23-233, the “Diverse Washingtonians Commemorative Works Amendment Act of 2019” and Bill 23-234, the “Advisory Commission on Monuments, Markers, and Symbols Establishment Act of 2019.” Relevant to these bills, I note that as the Director of the Office of Planning, I serve as Chairman of the Commemorative Works Committee. These bills reflect a recognition that commemorative works, and other forms of historic recognition, play a vital role in helping current and future DC residents, as well as visitors to our city, understand our history and culture, but that such works can also reflect a history that we do not wish to celebrate.

The timing of both bills is fortuitous, because it could align with current planning efforts. First, Mayor Bowser recently released the DC Cultural Plan, which emphasizes the rich and unique cultural history of the District of Columbia. Second, the Office of Planning is participating in the National Capital Planning Commission’s current work to update its Memorials and Museums Master Plan. Finally, the Commemorative Works Committee met in December 2019 to initiate a process that will include considering how to better achieve the goals of the original Commemorative Works Act, including reimagining what “commemoration” means, how the District of Columbia identifies subjects and locations for commemoration, and how those subjects are commemorated.

#### Diverse Washingtonians Commemorative Works Amendment Act of 2019 (B23-233)

First, I will speak to Bill 23-233, the “Diverse Washingtonians Commemorative Works Amendment Act of 2019”, which would direct the Commemorative Works Committee to

commission works to honor remarkable native Washingtonians and socially disadvantaged migrants who made Washington home and to prepare a written plan to erect no fewer than eight statues honoring these remarkable individuals throughout the city.

In directing the Commemorative Works Committee to commission works, this bill would expand the Committee's role from one of review, to include execution and implementation. Such an expansion in role and authority would have potentially significant budget and staffing implications that we have not studied.

The Bill would also require the Committee to prepare a plan to erect no fewer than eight statues honoring remarkable Washingtonians. The plan is to include recommended locations for each statue and identify the steps to have at least one statue erected in each Ward by January 1, 2030. In preparing the plan, the Committee is to consider input from residents, academics, cultural organizations, and other professionals. And the plan is to be submitted for Council review no later than 60 days from the date the Bill becomes effective.

The Bill's goal of honoring the remarkable achievements of Washingtonian's with commemorative works throughout the city is important and one on which we would very much like to work with the Council. For the purposes of today, I note that the budget and staffing implications of having the Commemorative Works Committee commission works requires careful attention. As currently drafted, the Bill is ambiguous as to whether the Committee would be required to commission statues for eight named individuals or whether those names are included for illustrative purposes. This should be clarified. It is also worth considering whether the bill should limit the subjects of commemorative works to individuals or be expanded to allow recognition of important events, social movements, or political achievements. Similarly, it is worth considering whether the commemorative works should be limited to statues or allowed to

include such works as monuments, landscape features, murals, and others. The Bill should also consider the increased resources, in terms of budget and staffing, required to prepare the commemorative works plan. Finally, I note that while it may be possible to erect eight new commemorative works by 2030, the 60-day turnaround for the Committee to solicit input and prepare a detailed commemorative works plan is unrealistic and would be impossible to meet. A useful and well-informed plan would require at least a year to complete. Who should be commemorated and specific locations for commemoration are complex topics on which the Committee will receive significant input and want to thoughtfully consider. Finally, it should be noted that plans to locate a single local or federal memorial or monument often takes years to complete.

Advisory Commission on Monuments, Markets, and Symbols Establishment Act of 2019

(B23-234)

Next, I will turn to the Bill 23-234, the “Advisory Commission on Monuments, Markers, and Symbols Establishment Act of 2019.” Bill 23-234 would direct the Mayor to establish a new Commission to study and make recommendations about what to do with monuments, markers, and symbols located on District property that are oppressive or inconsistent with DC values, within 120 days. After issuing the report, the Commission would disband.

As mentioned in my earlier testimony, the District has an established Commemorative Works Committee charged with developing “criteria to be used to review, evaluate, approve, or deny applications for placement of commemorative works” and to “review each application for . . . appropriateness of the . . . subject matter.” For future commemorative works, there are no explicit guidelines in existing law requiring the Committee to assess the subject of each

application to ensure it is consistent with District of Columbia values, but the current legislation authorizes the Committee to make this assessment.

As there is significant overlap between the Committee's District agency membership and the membership of the new commission contemplated in the Bill, a more efficient and effective approach may be for the Commemorative Work Committee to conduct the contemplated review, possibly with a special working group. Doing so would still require appropriate resources, but would benefit in time and content from an established institutional infrastructure and knowledge base. Additionally, whereas the new commission contemplated by this Bill would produce a report and then immediately sunset, the Commemorative Works Committee could revisit these issues periodically. However, regardless of who conducts the review, the 120-day period for public engagement, study, and delivery of recommendations to the Mayor and Council is unrealistic and would be impossible to meet. Additionally, should the Council decide to move forward with a separate commission, the requirement of Council consent for each ward representative makes the 30-day establishment of the Commission unrealistic.

I stand ready to work with the Committee of the Whole to identify the most appropriate District agency to undertake this study and the body to make recommendations to Council and the Mayor so that a more realistic timeline for completing the work can be developed.

This concludes my testimony. Again, I thank the Committee for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am happy to answer any questions.