



Government of the District of Columbia
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5601 Connecticut Avenue N.W.
P.O. Box 6252 Washington, D.C. 20015
Chevy Chase ANC 3/4G
ChevyChaseANC3@verizon.net
<http://www.anc3g.org>
YouTube: ANC3G
202.363.5803

**ANC 3/4G Testimony Before the
Committee on Government Operations
Performance Oversight Hearing for the
Secretary of the District of Columbia
February 26, 2020**

Chair Todd and members of the Committee on Government Operations, I am Randy Speck, Chair of ANC 3/4G (Chevy Chase), and I am testifying on behalf of our Commission, which authorized this testimony at its February 24, 2020 meeting by a vote of 4 to 0 (a quorum being 4).

The District of Columbia Archives and the Office of Public Records (OPR) — located within the Office of the Secretary of the District of Columbia — serve the key public purpose of storing, protecting, and organizing the government documents that constitute the most universal records of District residents and those of the government that serves them. Taken as a whole, these documents tell vivid stories about ordinary people of all races, classes, and genders, from all eight wards, representing both communities that exist and ones that have been lost. These documents allow both historians and family

genealogists to reconstruct the lives of ordinary residents. Additionally, the Archives holds records of public figures, objects, and private collections of public interest.¹ Among other things, these collections chronicle the struggles for home rule and civil rights that have defined the District.

The current facility used to store DC's valuable historical documents is a converted stable in Naylor Court, off Ninth Street, NW. That facility does not meet industry standards for security, fire protection, document preservation, or public access. It was commissioned in 1990 but immediately fell into disrepair due to budget cuts. Between that time and the restoration of the HVAC system in 2018, poor climate control allowed heat and humidity to severely damage paper, photographs, and objects, many of which were never separated from mold or materials that degrade them, e.g., metal paperclips, oils, and glue.

The current archive facility is also too small, leaving other government records scattered across District buildings and rented spaces. Indeed, the majority of public documents held by OPR are stored at a National Archives and Records Administration facility in Suitland, Maryland, at a cost of over \$600,000 per year. The full cost of offsite storage is difficult to calculate, however, because it is paid by the agencies that generated the records.

¹ A October 4, 2019 *Washington Post* op-ed by Kimberly Bender (founding executive director of the Heurich House Museum) and Neil Flanagan (writing a book about the Reno community and the origins of urban planning in the District) — available at <https://wapo.st/2T5usdw> — describes the kind of information that the archives contains and that should be better preserved and made available to the public.

Moreover, the lack of proper reading rooms means the archives are not reasonably available to the public. Because citizens and historians have limited access, staff resources are strained, making it difficult to accommodate school or university instruction, which is common elsewhere. When space is available, researchers must work in record storage areas, creating a significant security risk.

Peer institutions that store state or municipal documents do not tolerate such storage conditions. Nor would these conditions be considered acceptable for a university archive or private records collection. Most peer organizations are independent from the executive branch and operate either as independent agencies or governmentally-chartered institutions. This independence shields the archives from the cycles of government and politics that can hamper the long-term planning that is critical for a successful archive.

Between FY 2015 and FY 2019, the District appropriated over \$80 million to construct a new District Archives facility and to transfer and conserve the records currently stored in rented spaces. In addition to this appropriation, unexpended capital funds from earlier building proposals remain assigned to OPR. Meanwhile, OPR's operational budget has been insufficient to address the backlog of conservation work.

At the September 27, 2018 hearing on “District Historical Records Advisory Board Amendment Act of 2018” (B22-0842),² the Office of the Secretary announced that a new-construction archives, record, and education facility would be constructed at the University of the District of Columbia (UDC). The Secretary stated that construction

² Video of this hearing is available at <http://bit.ly/2VeOB3s>.

would begin in 2019. To date, however, no contracts for design or construction of these facilities has been issued, and there is no public land transfer agreement between UDC and the District.

In particular, the distinctive history of neighborhoods like ours needs to be preserved. For instance, the Archive should include documents related to the Moten family, the residents who lived in what is now Lafayette Park,³ and on the many historic buildings in our community. The Archives should also collect the papers of ward councilmembers. Former Ward 4 Councilmember Polly Shackleton donated her papers to George Washington University because of the poor condition of the District's Archives. The Archives should be upgraded to accept and preserve the paper for our current and former councilmembers when they have completed their public service. Finally, ANCs are required to retain their records, which are supposed to be collected by the Office of Advisory Neighborhood Commissioners, but there is currently no repository for the ANCs documents.

At a time of growth and major change in the District, ANC 3/4G recognizes the need for a new facility and resources to make public records a public resource. The Commission urges the Mayor and the Council to secure a site for the DC Archives and

³ Our ANC has requested that the Council enact legislation to add the name of Captain George Pointer to Lafayette Park and Lafayette Recreation Center so that they will be named "Lafayette-Pointer Park" and "Lafayette-Pointer Recreation Center." These names will acknowledge the history and dispossession of the black community on Broad Branch Road, NW. See ANC 3/4G's July 8, 2019 Resolution, available at <http://bit.ly/2T5Wxld>.

Office of Public Records at UDC, to design a facility, and to begin substantial construction by the end of FY 2021. Earlier appropriations for capital plans that are not dedicated to establishing a new facility at the UDC should be spent to complete the 25-year backlog of conservation work. These steps are necessary to preserve our residents' history in a timely and efficient fashion.

The Commission also urges the Council to create a lasting legacy for the District's citizens by establishing an independent District Records and Archives Agency, governed by an appointed board of specialists and citizens. This independence is the most effective way to ensure that a new facility is put to use in a timely fashion and that the operations of the archives are consistently and adequately funded in the future.

Thank you.