

TESTIMONY OF LAURA COHEN APELBAUM
Executive Director
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Before the Council of the District of Columbia
Committee on Libraries, Parks, Recreation and Planning
Thursday February 9, 2012

Good morning. I'm Laura Apelbaum and I serve as the Executive Director of the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington.

I appreciate this opportunity to testify on behalf of the DC Office of Planning's Historic Preservation Office and its funding of the DC Community Heritage Project.

These grants have been an important source of funding for us in a city where there are very scarce resources for humanities projects or for historic preservation-related projects.

The grants have allowed us to find new ways to engage visitors and diverse audiences about the history of our historic synagogue, its preservation, and its continuing restoration. This story reflects the city's diverse heritage and historic neighborhoods.

We have also been able to leverage these grants. We have successfully attracted additional private funding to augment the grant awards.

Our organization is dedicated to preserving, chronicling, and presenting the history of the local Jewish community. Our works centers on our historic synagogue—a small red brick building at 3rd and G Streets, which is the oldest synagogue in the city and the only Jewish structure in the city listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It is known for being moved in 1969 to save it from the wrecker's ball. We were proud to host Chairman Wells when he visited the historic synagogue last summer.

We have received two grants through the DC Community Heritage Project—one in 2009 and the other last year. Both have helped enrich the experience of our visitors.

Chairman Wells, you may remember that when you visited, the historic sanctuary was devoid of any interpretative material. That has changed. With support from the Community Heritage Project, we first convened a public meeting with esteemed academics to plan what stories we should tell in the sanctuary and now we also have several exhibition panels on display in the sanctuary. These panels include historic photographs and text which detail the dedication service attended in 1876 by President Grant, compare our building's architecture to other city buildings in the late 19th century, and provide profiles of some of the immigrant founders of the congregation and their lives in the neighborhood. Another panel outside on the corner tells the story of the changing neighborhood.

Visitors report how these images and documents help them understand the synagogue's story within the context of neighborhood and city history.

We also used grant funds to allow what we call "armchair visitors" to experience our history by creating a short film about the synagogue's history which is posted on YouTube.

We believe our projects have added diversity to a wonderful body of new educational research and resources across the city funded by the DC Community Heritage Project grants.

We are now able to show a slice of Jewish history in a former immigrant neighborhood where today office buildings and courthouses predominate—a piece of history that otherwise would not be obvious.

On behalf of the Jewish Historical Society, I express my support for continuing the Historic Preservation Office's efforts in the community to continue the DC Community Heritage Project grants. Thank you.