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March 2, 2016

Via electronic mail c/o ecash@dccouncil.us, Committee of the Whole Director

To: Chairman Phil Mendelson
Council of the District of Columbia
Washington, DC

Testimony by Miriam Nisbet, Before the Committee of the Whole (Chairman Phil Mendelson), On DC Archives, Monday, March 7, 2016

I write as a resident of the District of Columbia since 1978 and as the former Freedom of Information Act ombudsman for the US Government. I urge the Council to fully fund the DC Archives in the current fiscal year and to increase the funding in the next fiscal year.

The Friends of the DC Archives have spoken eloquently about the steps that are needed to ensure the protection of our city's historic records, as well as to prepare for the preservation of records that are being created today. The environmental conditions that I have learned about sound remarkably like those in developing countries—a situation that we cannot allow in our own city with its rich history. Moreover, inadequate funding threatens the ability of the Office of Public Records to help agencies manage their records, whether contemporary or historic.

Some people mistakenly think of archives as relevant only to historians and genealogists who, while important, are perhaps not seen as a high priority when taxpayer dollars are already spread thin. But we are all researchers of one kind or the other, and the Office of Public Records tries to make it possible every day for us to find documents to support our legal rights and benefits, to trace property interests, and to locate permits and licenses, just to name a few examples. If we do not support record keeping by our government now, then our archives tomorrow, including digital archives, will have gaping holes or will not exist.

Government accountability and transparency are words that are everyone's lips these days. I applaud the work of DC's Office of Open Government—and the Council under your leadership—to ensure that the DC Freedom of Information Act is strong. But the right to obtain government records through FOIA and other laws is meaningless unless the records are there and can be located.

Please support the DC Archives as a foundation of our democracy.