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**Testimony before the Committee of the Whole, Council of the District of Columbia
Oversight Hearing on the Executive Office of the Mayor
Secretary of the District of Columbia - DC Archives
Impediments to Public Access in Searching for Post-1949 Building Permits
7 March 2016**

My name is Evelyn Mittman Wrin and I am here to provide comments and observations with regard to public access to DC building permits and related documents held at the DC Archives.

In Chevy Chase DC we have a house plaque project sponsored by Chevy Chase Citizens Association and Historic Chevy Chase DC. The house plaques include the year the house was built, along with other information, generally the name of the architect or builder or identification as a catalog house. In my volunteer work with homeowners interested in purchasing a plaque, I look up information on a Building Permit Database prepared by Brian Kraft for the DC Historic Preservation Office. On occasion I also do some basic research in the Washingtoniana Room at MLK Library, where staff is always available and ready to provide assistance. The most common thing I look for is the initial building permit and occasionally subsequent building permits and other relevant documents, such as daily inspection reports.

In May of 2015 I was contacted by two homeowners interested in purchasing a plaque - both involved building permits issued after 1949. When I went to the Washingtoniana Room, I was surprised to find that any building permit issued after 1949 is not there. Instead I was told that one must go to the Dept. of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, fill out a request [or DCRA fills it out], which DCRA sends to the DC Archives for a response.

The initial building permit for one of the houses was from 1935, hence readily available in the Washingtoniana Room. However, the homeowner wanted the permit for an addition that he understood was constructed sometime between 1965 and 1970, hence not available in the Washingtoniana Room. However, he went the route of making a trip to DCRA offices and DCRA was to send his request to the Archives. On May 12 he received an email from the Archives consisting of two sentences that lacked clarity and appeared to contradict each other. On May 29, three weeks after going to DCRA for the first time, the homeowner received a voice mail message saying that no records had been found. So weeks after the initial inquiry, the homeowner still did not have a copy of the permit for the addition, whereas if it were pre-1950 he could in one day have looked at information available in the Washingtoniana Room. I arranged for an appointment with the Archives staff and it was agreed that the homeowner would be coming for the appointment at which time the Archives staff would make available whatever file it found. At that appointment, after three months and many phone calls and emails, as well as two trips to DCRA offices, he found the information he was looking for.

The second house was built in 1952, hence is not found in the Washingtoniana Room, so to find the building permit meant going through the cumbersome process for post-1949 building permits.

On June 15, 2015 I wrote to the Secretary of the District of Columbia and communicated with her for several months after that about both of the properties for which we were looking for building permits and about the problems with the existing process. Although generally not included in my volunteer work with house plaques, I decided to experience first-hand the process, so made an appointment and went to the Archives on August 17, 2015. Unfortunately the file I was given contained only papers related to a 1993 permit to build a deck, whereas I requested documents related to a "building permit from 1952 and any related documents." I requested that DCRA re-submit my request but have heard nothing further.

I understand that the aforementioned person who prepared the Building Permit Database for HPO offered to go through files at the DC Archives and incorporate post-1949 building permit information into his database. However, I was told that his offer was rejected.

The existing process serves as a deterrent and discourages the public from searching for post-1949 building permits and related documents. I have discussed this with numerous persons whose professional work involves searches for such documents and all expressed agreement with the need better public access.

There is no one I have talked with who knows why the system is bifurcated. Is it not possible for all building permits to be available through the Washingtoniana Room, as is done for pre-1950 building permits? That would serve the public interest better than the present bifurcated system, which results in significant impediments to public access.

I hope that someone will initiate a conversation among the various offices that will lead to improved public access for post-1949 building permits.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer these comments.