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TESTIMONY OF HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON, DC BOARD OF
TRUSTEES CO-CHAIR ALEXANDER M. PADRO AT THE PUBLIC ROUNDTABLE
ON BILL 18-0087, "MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF WASHINGTON, DC
ESTABLISHMENT ACT OF 2009," BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON LIBRARIES,
PARKS AND RECREATION OF THE COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF
COLUMBIA, APRIL 2, 2009

Good Morning, Chairman Thomas, Members of the Committee, and Staff. I am Alexander M. Padro, co-chair of the Board of Trustees of the Historical Society of Washington, DC. I am pleased to be here to offer some observations related to the important work of the Society, its recent evolution into an organization with a greater impact on every group of stakeholders in our city, the impact of the Society's presence on Mount Vernon Square and the surrounding neighborhood, and to urge the Council to approve the legislation before you today.

I spent the first 30 years of my life in New York City, where the local government provided financial support not only to the New-York Historical Society, founded as a private organization in 1804, but also to the Museum of the City of New York, a public entity formed in 1923. Both organizations are incredible resources for residents and are popular destinations for locals and visitors alike. I try to visit the New-York Historical Society every time I get to New York City, as they do a fantastic job of making that city's history accessible and relevant to today's audiences.

So you can imagine my disappointment upon learning that Washington's historical society, which I became a member of shortly after moving here, received little or no funding from the District government. This neglect of heritage and culture seemed like yet another example of our unique quasi-colonial status. The historical society had modest programs at its longtime home in the Heurich Mansion off Dupont Circle, but did not reach out effectively to the range of interest groups that should have been obvious consumers of what a historical society can offer. Indeed, the organization was often referred to by members of the African American community as "the White historical society."

Today, after several years of rebuilding the organization following the closure of the City Museum project that resulted in the society's relocation to the old Carnegie Library at Mount Vernon Square, and improved District government support, the Historical Society of Washington, DC is a much different institution, one that reaches out to all eight wards of the city, whose collections, exhibits, and programs span racial, ethnic, and religious barriers, and even sexual orientation to embrace the essence of our city's diversity. Civic associations and longtime businesses are entrusting their archives to the Historical Society for preservation and public access. Countless photographs from our collections can be viewed online by visitors to our website. Schoolchildren and scholars alike conduct research in our library. Our exhibits have ranged from Negro League baseball and the 1968 riots to the art of Frank Smith and Lillian Spandorf. Our new magazine illustrates that we have free public programs for all Washingtonians, practically from cradle to grave, almost every day of the month. We are developing new historical curricula for the DC Public Schools. The Society has even curated the exhibit on the Wilson Building's history outside the Council Chamber. This is clearly no longer "the White historical society."

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So your initiative, Chairman Thomas, to establish sustainable public funding from the District government for the Society's work could not come at a more appropriate time, as our programs and activities have reached an unprecedented level of public engagement and accessibility.

From my perspective as an Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner in Shaw and executive director of Shaw Main Streets, the commercial revitalization and historic preservation nonprofit organization serving central Shaw's 7th and 9th Street corridors, I have observed the changes in the neighborhood that have accompanied the resurgence of the Historical Society at Mount Vernon Square. With everything that's happening at the Carnegie, with busloads of tourists and children coming to see exhibits, programs, and even to have lunch, Mount Vernon Square is coming alive again. People are coming to lunchtime and after work outdoor concerts sponsored by the Society, and are sitting on the giant curved marble bench in good weather. And they're beginning to explore north of Mount Vernon Square as they realize that there's a neighborhood north of Chinatown worthy of their time and attention.

On that tall marble bench in front of the Carnegie are inscribed the words, "A University for the People," a motto chosen to reflect the role the city's first central public library represented for everyone in Washington, regardless of class or color. The legislation you have introduced will ensure that the Historical Society of Washington and the Museum of the City of Washington, DC, will be able to fulfill the promise of being a university for the people well into the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer these comments. And thank you for your support of the Historical Society of Washington, DC. I am available to answer any questions you may have of me.

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