

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

City shouldn't impede religious freedom

Third Church of Christ, Scientist, is grateful for the balanced coverage in the March 19 article "Evans withdraws bill on church landmarks." However, two points need to be corrected.

In the late 1960s, we built our church building on the corner of 16th and I streets with our own funds on land owned by others. We have never owned the land under the church building. Since the mid-1980s, Third Church has been considering various redevelopment proposals, and with ICG we have finally found a suitable partner.

The D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board process that landmarked the Third Church building does not allow a church to raise the rights of religious freedom created by federal laws enacted in 1993 and 2000. Our proposed amendment is designed to correct that flaw and to protect churches and other religious institutions in the exercise of those rights.

The amendment would be retroactive to the effective date of the 1993 federal law and would apply only to religious institutions that, at the time they were landmarked, asserted that their rights of religious expression were being adversely impacted. From our review of the Historic Preservation Review Board record, the exemption would apply clearly to only one other church, with four other churches potentially able to qualify.

Since the enactment of these federal laws, historic landmarking has never been deemed to be such a compelling governmental interest that it overcomes a congregation's right to determine how best to express its faith in its architecture. That is what the proposed amendment is about. For Third Church, it represents an opportunity to build a new church, one better serving its 90-year mission in the heart of downtown Washington, D.C.

In the absence of a finding of compelling interest by the D.C. government, we believe we should be allowed to demolish our building and proceed with a new structure that would allow for our religious exercise. The new building would be consistent with the 16th Street Historic District and the L'Enfant Plan. It would be subject to the approval of the Historic Preservation Review Board.

Lois Khairallah

*Chair, Board of Trustees,
Third Church of Christ, Scientist*