Testimony on Bill No. 140712 and Resolution 140732
December 9, 2014
Committee on Law and Government

Good morning Chairman Greenlee and Members of the Law and Government Committee.

My name is Craig Schelter. I am the Executive Director of the Development Workshop, Inc. We are a 501(c)(6) non-profit trade association dedicated to fostering development, improving the City’s tax base and growing Philadelphia. Our members include developers, lenders, architects, planners, former City development officials, lawyers, engineers and associated real estate professionals.

We would like to thank the Chairman and members of the Committee for this opportunity to participate in this hearing about the proposed Charter change that would dramatically reorganize City agencies dealing with planning and development in the City of Philadelphia.

During the past six years, this City has dealt with the complexity of creating and adopting a new zoning code, which has proven far more complex than originally anticipated. Now, President Darrell Clarke has advanced to the next stage of reform through an extensive Home Rule Charter amendment. The main focus is to create a new cabinet-level position, the Director of Planning and Development. The Director would be responsible for overseeing the City’s planning, zoning, licensing, inspection, enforcement and housing functions.

Let me be clear, The Development Workshop supports the idea of creating a cabinet-level position Director of Planning and Development under the Home Rule Charter. Nevertheless, because of the complexity and importance of the proposed Charter change, the Workshop does not support the current proposal to put a Charter change on the ballot as reflected in Bill No. 140721. Nor do we support the 22 page Resolution No. 140732 which deals with the details of the Charter change. Many of the potential changes appear to be good ones, but without addressing the operational mechanics of implementation.

* A change so dramatic should not be put into place without the informed input of all stakeholders, deliberating over a reasonable period of time. Those stakeholders include community groups, housing advocates, developers, lenders, architects, planners, institutions and other City officials from both the executive and legislative branch of government.
* Further thought should be given within the proposed framework to preserve the independence of the following agencies:

♦Planning Commission

♦Zoning Board of Adjustment

♦Historic Commission

Currently these three bodies are independent entities. Under the current proposal, they would reside within departments.

* While numerous proposed revisions appear to clarify and strengthen the development process, the crucial approval functions of the Water Department and Streets Department are omitted from what seems to be an overall comprehensive effort to address the development and planning process. (No development today can proceed until Stormwater Management plans and Complete Streets requirements are approved by the two departments respectively.)
* We have concern about making L&I a division of the Planning and Development Directors office. A better approach may be retaining L&I under a strengthened Managing Directors office in the current framework.

The fundamental challenge for the City with regard to L&I is to adequately fund, staff, train and supervise officials who are essentially the frontline of health and safety in Philadelphia’s built environment. The proposed Charter change does not address these vital issues.

* There appears to be substantial ambiguity between the role of the City Planning Commission and that of the Interdepartmental Housing Commission (IHC), since both effect community development policy. While the City Planning Commission’s composition is more clear, the IHC composition at this time is undefined. Consideration ought to be given to specifically include the Land Bank in this process as well as other unnamed housing providers.

In conclusion, the Workshop commends Council President for taking on this effort. Our members are ready, willing and able to participate in further Councilmanic and stakeholder discussions.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.