



HISPANIC BAR ASSOCIATION OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

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March 21, 2016

Jamie Riley
Letters and Local Opinions Editor
The Washington Post
Washington, D.C.

**Re: February 26, 2016 Op-Ed by the Honorable Eric T. Washington, Chief Judge,
District of Columbia Court of Appeals**

Dear Mr. Riley:

The Hispanic Bar Association of the District of Columbia (“HBA-DC”) writes to express the same concerns Chief Judge Eric T. Washington expressed in his February 26th [Op-Ed](#). In his Op-Ed, Chief Judge Washington shared his views regarding the placement of two large pavilions at the plaza entrance of the D.C. Court of Appeals, which will serve as entrances to the future National Law Enforcement Museum.

The HBA-DC strongly supports building the future National Law Enforcement Museum in our nation’s capital. It is well-deserved and noble to honor the men and women that serve our nation and defend and protect our communities. What concerns us, however, is the public’s perception of the D.C. courts and their mission to protect rights and liberties, uphold and interpret the law, and resolve disputes peacefully, fairly and effectively without the perception of undue influence. Like Chief Judge Washington, the HBA-DC believes that these entrances should be scaled down and reoriented so that they could be accessed directly from the sidewalk on E Street without the perception that the museum is connected to or endorsed by the D.C. courts.

Some of us may sometimes be desensitized to the power of symbolism and imagery, but we must also recognize that others have entirely different perceptions of symbols and imagery when they are unfamiliar with the legal system. This is particularly poignant to recognize in a system that is struggling to balance the safety concerns of officers and residents with the lack of confidence that some communities have in law enforcement agencies. In this atmosphere, the size, orientation, and the proximity of the entrance pavilions can affect the public’s perceptions of judicial independence. As the Chief Judge stated in his Op-Ed, the very foundation of our legal system can be undermined if the Districts’ residents perceive our court system to be improperly influenced or biased in favor of law enforcement.

Visitors, District residents, and most importantly, aggrieved parties may believe that the pavilions are part of the Courthouse. This may send a message to District residents, including



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the over 68,000 Latinos that live in the District, that the Court is categorically biased in favoring one side—that of law enforcement. These types of misconceptions, naturally, begin to undermine the public's trust, perceptions, and confidence that the Court will administer justice impartially.

The HBA-DC is particularly concerned that many Latinos may feel intimidated as they walk past the entrance pavilions on their way to the Courthouse. While community relations between Latinos and law enforcement in the District have come a long way since the Mt. Pleasant disturbances of 1991, many Latinos and other minorities are still wary of police contact for reasons associated with language barriers, immigration status, economic class, or individualized experiences with law enforcement. According to a 2014 Pew Research Center/USA Today national [survey](#), while 77 percent of whites expressed confidence that police in their communities could gain the trust of local residents, only 51 percent of Hispanics feel as confident. Walking into a courthouse may be a foreign and intimidating experience for many. It should not be made even more so, particularly when there are alternative options available that do not take away from the importance and respect for the National Law Enforcement Museum.

For the sake of maintaining a justice system that is fair and impartial both in practice and in perception, the relevant commissions should consider these concerns and modify the orientation and design of the museum's entrance pavilions.

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The HBA-DC is a non-profit organization established in the District of Columbia in 1977. The HBA-DC membership includes several hundred lawyers practicing in Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia, Latino students attending local law schools, and other non-lawyers who join as associate members. The HBA-DC is dedicated to several principles, including promoting equal justice and opportunity for all Hispanics.

Very truly yours,

Edgar Class
President
Hispanic Bar Association of the District of Columbia

cc: Marcel Acosta, National Capital Planning Commission
Thomas Luebke, U.S. Commission of Fine Arts