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Planning Commission Approves Final Urban Design and Security Plan for the Nation's Capital

Washington, DC – Members of the National Capital Planning Commission today unanimously approved the final draft of The National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan, a comprehensive report aimed at balancing the need for security with good urban design for the nation's capital. The Plan responds to the alarming proliferation of unattractive, makeshift security barriers that have gone up throughout the capital city with increasing frequency since the 9-11 terrorist attacks.

Prepared by the Commission's Interagency Security Task Force, the Plan identifies permanent security and streetscape improvements for federal facilities and key areas in the nation's capital, including Downtown, the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials, and Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House. The report focuses on perimeter building security and seeks to balance legitimate security needs with preserving Washington's historic urban design.

Today's vote by the Commission means the Plan can now be forwarded to Congress and the White House for approval. In addition, the Plan will be distributed to federal agencies as a guide for integrating security elements into current building perimeter security plans.

"This Plan is extremely important as our capital's soul is being robbed," said task force chairman, Richard Friedman. "If we continue to ignore the deterioration of this great capital city, we will fail the American people and the visionary leaders who came before us. We must do all that we can to ensure that Washington is not permanently defined by a barrage of unsightly and inadequate barriers."

"The Commission recognizes the need to address legitimate security concerns, but we do not believe a secure city has to be an unattractive city – it simply requires vision, focus and prioritization," said NCPC Chairman John V. Cogbill, III. "Our security must not be gained at the expense of the very values and qualities we seek to protect – accessibility, openness, and civic beauty."

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The Plan is the result of a collaborative effort that includes a wide range of viewpoints and expertise shared by staff of federal and city agencies, urban designers and landscape architects, community groups, historic preservationists, security experts – including the Secret Service and FBI – and members of the general public.

The public had the chance to offer its viewpoints during a 60-day public comment period held July 11 – September 9, 2002. The task force took all comments into consideration when finalizing the Plan.

“We wanted to get it right and we knew we couldn’t do it alone,” said Friedman. “By working together, we’ve developed a plan that can help set the standard for 21st Century security design – not only to be used in the nation’s capital, but throughout the nation. After all, rows of jersey barriers are no more attractive in Biloxi, Mississippi than they are in Washington, D.C.”

Many of those who commented on the Plan said they believe it can help in making sure the nation’s capital is safe but inviting.

“The Plan is sensitive to the varied character of Washington’s downtown commercial and governmental precincts,” said D.C. Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton. “NCPC planners have recognized that in security design one size does not fit all and that different design approaches for different areas of the city are necessary.”

“It is only natural that ASLA endorse the Urban Design and Security Plan,” said Marcia August, director of public and government affairs for the American Society of Landscape Architects. “It embodies the core principles that guide the practice of landscape architecture: creating places that are both functional and beautiful, integrating the natural and built environments, and making places where people feel welcome and comfortable, rather than alienated.”

“My family visited Washington, DC in June and the concrete barriers made our Capitol seem like a city under siege,” said tourist Gem Meacham from Kilgore, Texas. “Your plan to establish security parameters that are attractive but functional is essential. The sooner the better.”

One issue raised during the public comment period addressed the possible impact on parking and access to sidewalks in the capital area.

“I am in total support of the highest security for our nation’s capital,” said tourist Debbie Beavers who also expressed concern about a reduction in parking spots. “Making it even harder for tourists to park and visit the many sites would not be my plan to try and increase tourism.”

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“The issue of parking is a valid question,” said Chairman Cogbill. “That’s why the Plan identifies the need for a comprehensive traffic and parking study to determine, evaluate, and address the impact of the plan on parking space reductions or parking lane closures.” The Plan details how building perimeter security can be seamlessly integrated into consistent, welcoming streetscapes. It focuses exclusively on perimeter building security and does not address building hardening, operational procedures or surveillance. It covers contextual areas, special streets, and memorials.

In recommending designs, the Plan proposes to introduce a vocabulary of unifying planters, benches, and seat bollards to improve connections to other precincts, enhance the pedestrian experience, and help establish the character of the precinct.

The Plan includes:

- A summary of the building perimeter security considerations that influence the conceptual streetscape designs proposed in the Plan.
- Streetscape design concepts that incorporate security components. These conceptual designs illustrate how an array of landscape treatments and street furniture may be applied within various areas of the Plan and are not intended as final designs.
- A proposal to initiate the Circulator transportation system; develop a comprehensive parking program, including possible secure, centralized facilities; and undertake a set of comprehensive traffic and parking studies to evaluate impacts and develop strategies for mitigating and improving the overall condition.
- An implementation strategy for design, construction, funding, maintenance, and operations. The implementation program will ensure that work is completed according to the design intent and that improvements are maintained.

The Plan was motivated by several key issues which included providing appropriate levels of perimeter security; providing a seamless system of components that enhance the public realm and provide security; expanding the palette of elements that can provide perimeter security; and giving priority to achieving aesthetic continuity along streets.

The National Capital Planning Commission is the federal government’s central planning agency in the District of Columbia and surrounding counties in Maryland and Virginia. The Commission provides overall planning guidance for federal land and buildings in the region. It also reviews the design of federal projects and memorials, oversees long-range planning for future development, and monitors capital investment by federal agencies.

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