

STAFF RECOMMENDATION



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NCPC File No. 6910

NATIONAL MALL AND MEMORIAL PARKS WAYFINDING AND SIGN PROGRAM - PEDESTRIAN PYLON PANEL COLOR

National Mall and East Potomac Park
Washington, DC

Submitted by the National Park Service

October 29, 2009

Abstract

At its July 2009 meeting, the Commission approved final site development plans for the National Park Service's proposed pedestrian wayfinding pylons and maps, part of a comprehensive sign program for National Park Service-managed land on the National Mall and in East Potomac Park. Existing signs will be removed. Although it approved the fabrication and installation of pylons and maps, the Commission deferred final action on the color of the pylon panels, finding that the National Park Service had not fully made the case for its then-preferred four-color scheme and allowing the Park Service time to undertake further field study and consultation. The action before the Commission at this meeting is review of the "monochrome" gray panel color, which is the only color scheme submitted by the National Park Service. The overall sign program includes operational signs, the orientation (map) and wayfinding (pylon) signs, and monument identification signs. The third component of the sign program, monument identification signs, has not been submitted for review. The signs are funded through the National Park Service's Centennial Fund with a match from the Trust for the National Mall. All alternatives in the National Mall Plan, now in progress, include a new wayfinding and sign program.

Commission Action Requested by Applicant

Approval of final site development plans, pursuant to § 8722(b)(1) and (d).

Executive Director's Recommendation

The Commission:

Commends the National Park Service for proposing a comprehensive sign program that includes wayfinding, a sign function that has not heretofore been implemented on the National Mall.

Approves the monochrome color scheme for the pylons, as shown on NCPC Map File No. 1.41(78.00)42880.

Notes:

- That the content and location of the pylon panels and maps was developed by the National Park Service in consultation with staff, the District of Columbia Office of Planning, and stakeholders and consulting parties, according to earlier conditions placed on approval of the sign program by the Commission and the D.C. State Historic Preservation Office.
- That the Commission of Fine Arts approved the monochrome gray panel scheme for the pylons, characterizing it as “dignified, elegant, and timeless,” and did not approve the four-color panel scheme.
- That the Commission approved final site development plans for the fabrication and installation of the pedestrian guide pylons and the maps, as well as the installation of operational signs on the National Mall, and that the National Park Service has not submitted monument identification signs.

Advises the National Park Service that at the July 9, 2009 meeting, the Commission “recommend[ed] that the DC Circulator’s National Mall routes be included in the sign program.”

* * *

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Site

The Commission has approved the National Park Service’s (NPS) installation of a comprehensive sign program for the National Mall and East Potomac Park. The signs will be installed in the shaded area shown below, although the sign content includes destinations in Downtown, Penn Quarter, Chinatown, Foggy Bottom, Southwest Waterfront, and Capitol Hill.



Background

At its July 2009 meeting, the Commission approved the fabrication and installation of the pedestrian guide pylons and map kiosks as a coordinated system of information for visitors to the National Mall and East Potomac Park, and to the Monumental Core and adjacent areas. The Commission deferred approval of the pylon panel color scheme, pending further study and consultation by NPS. The pedestrian pylon is a component of a comprehensive wayfinding and orientation system for visitor attractions on the National Mall and in East Potomac Park, as well

as for institutions and services near the National Mall. NPS's National Mall and Memorial Parks was successful in being awarded Centennial Funds, which have been matched by funds from the Trust for the National Mall. An improved sign program is included in all alternatives for the National Mall Plan, currently in development.

The wayfinding and orientation system will assist visitors in finding destinations on the Mall and nearby destinations beyond the Mall. The content of the NPS signs and maps complements the signs and maps erected by other entities on and near the National Mall for public and private-sector visitor attractions, services, and institutions. Wayfinding is extended by the blue DDOT signs installed along the north-south streets of the National Mall and along Constitution and Independence Avenues.

NPS has coordinated extensively with the institutions on the National Mall, the District of Columbia Office of Planning (DC OP) and its stakeholders, including the business improvement districts, Destination DC, and Cultural Tourism DC. Stakeholders met in meetings and on site this past summer to finalize the destinations shown on the signs and maps. In addition, the DC State Historic Preservation Office (DC SHPO) and NCPC staffs field-checked proposed placement of pylons and maps to assess visual effects, especially near memorials and at prominent locations, as required for completion of the Section 106 review of the project.

In the discussion at both the June 2009 and July 2009 meetings, commissioners strongly recommended that the routes of the DC Circulator be included on the map. The map contains the Tourmobile route and the location of the nearby Metrorail stations only.

Project Proposal

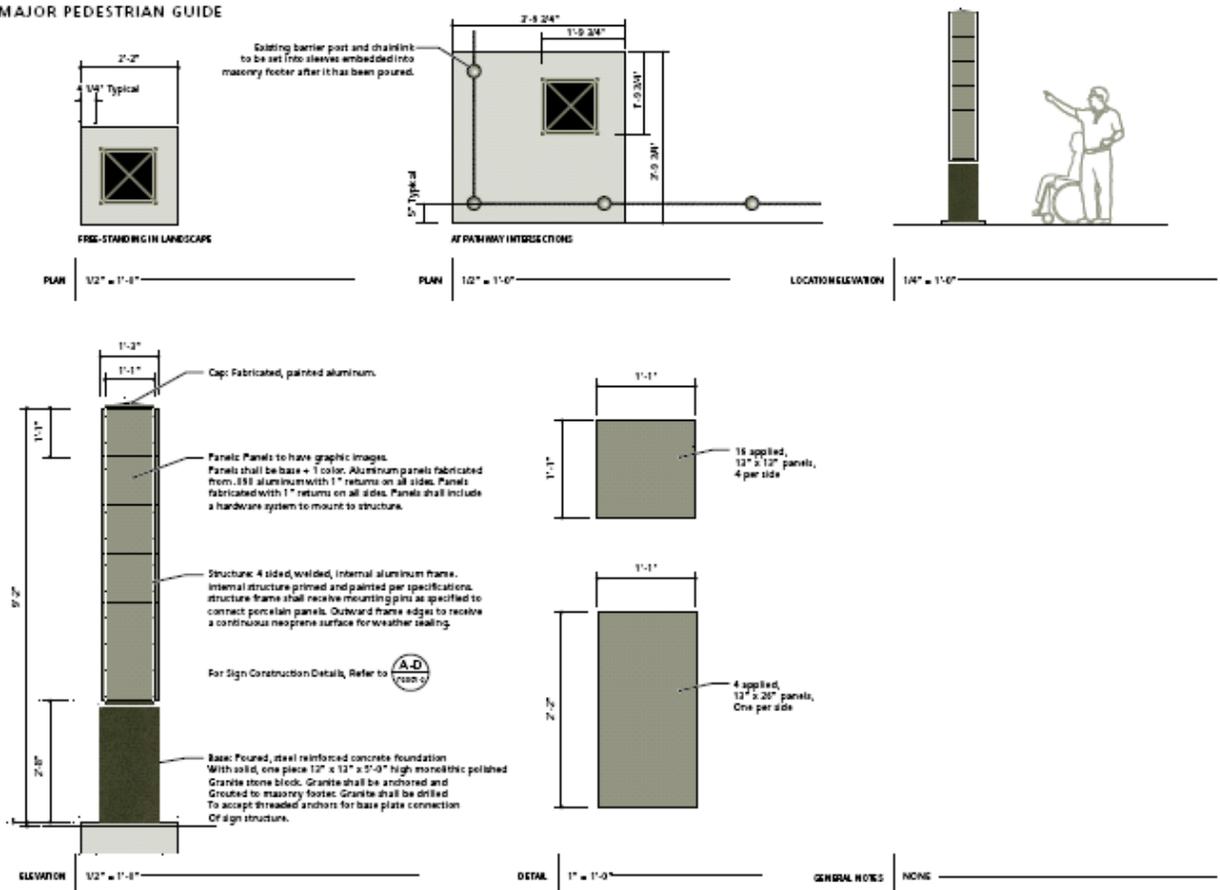
The Commission approved the fabrication and installation of the pylons and maps at its July 2009 meeting. The pylons will be fabricated in two heights, the taller at 9'2" and the shorter at 5'6" feet. The taller pylon (measuring 14 inches in width and depth) will be installed at major path and road intersections. The shorter pylon (measuring 10 inches in width and depth) will be installed at minor path intersections where additional wayfinding is deemed necessary, well as in open areas near memorials. The pylon will be fabricated of dark steel with the lower portion clad in dark gray granite. Each face of the pylon will have a forward-facing arrow at the top, with porcelain enamel panels with the names and pictograms of destinations. The pylon panels and the map faces are designed to be removable components and will be updated as necessary.

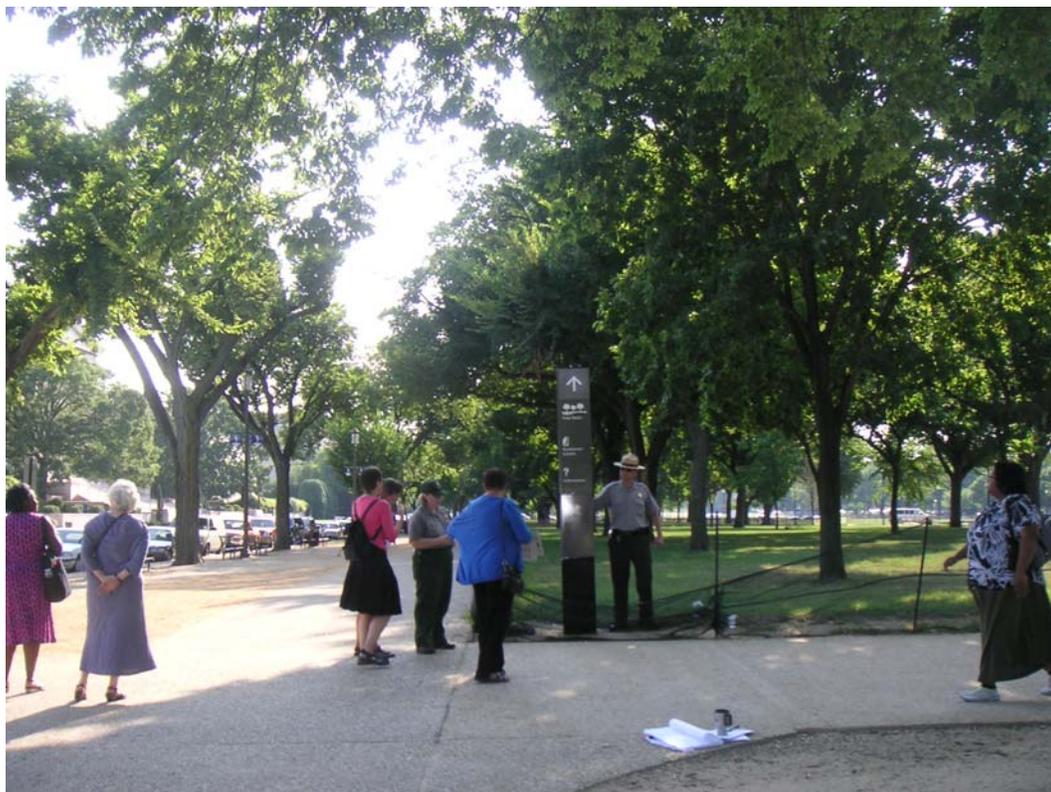
The matter before the Commission at this meeting is the proposal for the pylon message panel color, which was deferred at the July 2009 meeting. At that meeting, NPS submitted two proposals for the color scheme: the four-color panel scheme, which was its preferred scheme at that time, and the gray monochrome scheme, which was the alternative scheme approved by the Commission of Fine Arts (CFA). In its review of the project, especially at the meeting immediately prior to the Commission's July meeting, CFA continued to strongly recommend the monochrome scheme and did not approve the four-color scheme. At the staff's recommendation, the Commission deferred action on that decision to allow NPS further time to further study the two alternatives with NCPC staff and others. NPS constructed a pylon with gray panels and

tested it in the field with tourists as well as NCPC staff, DC SHPO staff, and interested representatives of the stakeholder group assembled by the District Office of Planning and NPS.

After testing the gray pylon in the field and being satisfied with its performance, NPS decided to submit it alone to the Commission for final approval. Study of the mock-up in the field showed that the contrast and legibility of the white letters and pictograms against the gray panel background was an improvement on the earlier four-color scheme, and that the gray pylon was both sufficiently visible and not intrusive in the landscape of the Mall. The pylon was tested in areas of the National Mall with tree canopies and with open vistas.

PG001 MAJOR PEDESTRIAN GUIDE









PROJECT ANALYSIS

The staff recommends approval of the monochrome scheme for the pedestrian wayfinding pylons, consisting of gray porcelain panels with white lettering and pictograms and dark gray granite bases.

In its earlier consideration of a range of color schemes, including NPS's then-preferred four-color scheme and the current monochrome gray scheme, NCPC staff sought a balance among aesthetic, symbolic, and functional goals. Staff weighed the advantages of the elegant and dignified appearance of the monochrome gray pylon on the National Mall against the advantages of the "sorting" of destinations earlier desired by NPS in its four-color scheme. Staff concluded that while the sorting feature would be useful to visitors who would recognize the colors and understand their meaning, the colors would not be meaningful to other visitors unfamiliar with the color code. The staff has discussed the intended meaning of the colors with many people during the review of the project – commissioners and staff, consulting parties and various stakeholders, and tourists on the Mall—and has observed a range of opinions about the meaning and utility of the color-coded scheme.

For aesthetic reasons, the staff prefers the gray pylon panels. The appearance is more elegant, formal, and architectural in character, and less like an urban or commercial sign in character. The field-testing of the gray pylon demonstrated that the dark and uniform color of the panels allowed the white lettering and pictograms to show clearly and legibly. The field-testing also showed that the gray pylon was highly compatible with the character of the monumental landscape and memorials while being clearly visible and identifiable as a wayfinding sign from a distance. The uniform background color of the pylon panels assists the legibility of the sign information and better complements the dark granite pylon base.

However, staff and commissioners also expressed reservations about the gray color not being sufficiently visible or useful to visitors. *Staff believes that the field-testing of the gray pylon has confirmed its usefulness, as well as the appropriate degree of visibility, and its superior compatibility with the landscape and monuments of the National Mall.*

Staff questioned some of NPS's rationale for color distinctions during early phases of the project, especially the apparent jurisdictional distinction. Staff believes that the use of the gray panels eliminates some expressed reservations about the four-color scheme, including the distinctions between institutions on the Mall inherent in the color-coded scheme, and the emphasis (to some viewers) of restrooms and food service over major memorials caused by the numerically infrequent use of the color denoting services.

NCPC Commission members also questioned the meaning and coordination of the pylon and map colors for destinations during the June 4, 2009 site visit when they noted that NPS memorials, NPS visitor services, and Smithsonian museums were depicted in three different colors on the pylon panels but in the same color (NPS brown) on the map. This highlighted an internal consistency of the proposed color scheme.

NPS also restudied its earlier plan to use blue panels to reference the blue DDOT wayfinding signs. Instead, NPS has added off-Mall destinations and visitor information to the pylon panels (as well as to the maps). At the recommendation of DC OP and its stakeholders, pylons at or near the edges of the National Mall will include the names of nearby urban neighborhoods and the words “Dining and Shopping.” The following neighborhood names will appear on the pylon panels and maps: Downtown, Foggy Bottom, Penn Quarter, Chinatown, Capitol Hill, and Southwest Waterfront.

DC Circulator Routes on the Map

The staff advises NPS that the Commission, in its July 9, 2009 Commission Action, recommended that the DC Circulator’s National Mall routes, as part of a comprehensive transit system for the Mall, be included in the sign program. A comprehensive system will benefit visitors and residents alike, and will reflect the centrality of the National Mall in the planning framework of Washington and the greater integration of the National Mall with the surrounding downtown and federal precincts as envisioned in the Monumental Core Framework Plan.

NPS anticipates releasing its Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the Mall Transportation Plan before the end of this year.

CONFORMANCE

Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital

The following are applicable policies from the *Preservation and Historic Features Element* of the Comprehensive Plan:

National Capital Image

1. Express the dignity befitting the image of the federal government in the national capital.
5. Protect and enhance the vistas and views, both natural and designed, that are an integral part of the national capital’s image.

Stewardship of Historic Properties

5. Identify and protect both the significant historic design integrity and the use of historic landscapes and open spaces.

The Historic Plan of Washington, DC

2. Promote continuity in the historic design framework of the nation’s capital by protecting and enhancing the elements, views, and principles of the L’Enfant Plan.

5. Protect the reservations that contain historic landscapes and features from incompatible changes or incursions.

The following is an applicable policy from the *Transportation Element* of the Comprehensive Plan:

In order to create an integrated network of complementary transit services, the federal government should support:

5. The design and implementation of new, expanded, and innovative transit services that supplement existing transit and fill unmet needs (e.g., Downtown Circulator, Busway, Bus Rapid Transit projects, light rail, trolley).

Relevant Federal Facility Master Plan

Since 2006, NPS has been engaged in consultation and study leading to the development of the National Mall Plan, which will be released in draft later this year. All alternatives in the Plan include the removal of the existing signs on the National Mall and their replacement with a comprehensive wayfinding and sign program. NPS has received thousands of comments from the public since 2006 expressing concern with the current sign confusion and visual clutter.

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)

NPS undertook its own internal analysis for its NEPA compliance and determined that the installation of the proposed signs meets NPS' Categorical Exclusion C.5., as specified in NPS Director's Order 12, because it is NPS' view that the sign program replaced the existing signs on the National Mall and in East Potomac Park, would not disturb previously undisturbed soil, and would have minimal visual impact, as also determined by the D.C. State Historic Preservation Officer through the Section 106 consultation.

Under NCPC's Environmental and Historic Preservation Policies and Procedures, staff relied on the categorical exclusion at Section 8(c)2. Staff made this determination in the context of Section 106 consultation with the District of Columbia State Historic Preservation Officer, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, other federal and District of Columbia agencies, and the consulting parties for the National Mall Plan.

National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA)

NPS has completed its Section 106 responsibilities for this undertaking.

The D.C. State Historic Preservation Officer (DC SHPO) determined that the undertaking would have *No Adverse Effect*, conditioned upon field-checking the pylon locations for visual effects near memorials. The required field work by DC SHPO and NCPC staffs with NPS has been completed.

The wayfinding pylon is a design developed specifically for the Mall and is not part of the palette of the UniGuide system. As such, it was not covered by the nationwide Programmatic Agreement and was reviewed for design and location by the DC SHPO. In a letter dated March 9, 2009, the DC SHPO concurred that the signs would have *No Adverse Effect* on the National Mall or East Potomac Park. The DC SHPO found the wayfinding project:

. . . commendable because the standardization of inconsistent signage will greatly improve the mismatched conditions that currently exist. The total number of signs may ultimately increase, but the need for additional signage has long been recognized and the relatively modest size of most of the proposed signs will result in negligible visual effect when compared to the monumental scale of the National Mall. Locating the signage along the perimeter of the National Mall will help to minimize visual impacts by ensuring that primary views and vistas are not interrupted

NPS provided program and design information to organizations and individuals participating in the National Mall Plan Section 106 consultation and posted information on its Planning, Environment and public Comment (PEPC) website. The sign program was discussed at Mall Plan Section 106 consultation meetings. Since late spring, NPS has also met with the DC Office of Planning and stakeholder organizations representing interests near the Mall to provide input to NPS on the content of the maps and pylons. The pylon and map content has been revised to include the place names of commercial areas and neighborhoods as well as specific public and private-sector visitor attractions such as museums. “Dining and Shopping” has been added to the panels of pylons near the edge of the National Mall.

The DC SHPO, in its letter of March 9, 2009, determined that the signs would have *No Adverse Effect* on the historic properties of the Mall provided that NPS: 1) consult further with the DC SHPO during the CFA and NCPC review processes regarding the final type, location and number of pedestrian guide pylons near the major monuments and memorials (noting concern for use of the tall pylons near the Washington Monument); 2) provide additional opportunities for public review and comment such as the National Mall Plan meeting forum; and 3) assess the potential for archaeological impacts for signage located outside of East and West Potomac Parks where the soil is not entirely composed primarily of fill.

NCPC’s Section 106 responsibilities incorporated consultation with DC OP and its stakeholders, fieldwork with the DC SHPO, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, other agencies, and consulting parties. Discussion focused primarily on the design and placement of the taller pylons, the content of the signs and maps, and the overall number of signs.

CONSULTATION

Coordinating Committee

The Coordinating Committee reviewed the wayfinding and sign program at its meeting on February 11, 2009. All agencies present coordinated the project.

Commission of Fine Arts

At its June 18, 2009 meeting, the Commission of Fine Arts voted to approve a monochromatic color scheme for the pylons: gray destination panels on a gray granite pylon base. CFA confirmed its earlier May 21 preference for the monochromatic scheme.

During a lengthy and deliberative discussion, CFA commissioners reviewed several options presented by NPS to “sort” destinations by color, but did not support any of the options that introduced multiple panel colors or colors other than gray. In addition to its aesthetic and symbolic arguments, CFA did not accept the concept of sorting by color, stating that the identifying pictograms were “visually strong” and sufficient for wayfinding.

CFA strongly felt that a gray monochromatic design was “dignified, elegant, and timeless” and most appropriate for the “National Mall as a whole,” and that the colored panels were commercial in character and not suitable. CFA members also expressed concern for the negative symbolic message of what they deemed to be the unnecessary division by color into NPS and other entities’ attractions (on and off the Mall) as also being irrelevant for visitors.

CFA members cited the vision and goals of the Monumental Core Framework Plan to integrate planning for the entities on the National Mall as well as to unify on-Mall and off-Mall destinations

Referral to relevant local planning agencies

NPS consulted with the District of Columbia Office of Planning (DC OP) staff, business improvement districts, the D.C. Visitor Center, Cultural Tourism, and other community partners on both the content of the information proposed for the maps and pylons and the coordinated placement of the pylons in relation to the blue DDOT wayfinding signs. “Dining and Shopping” and neighborhood names were added to location-appropriate pylon panels at DC OP’s request. The final plans, including the proposed use of the monochrome pylon and the information content of each pylon by location, was provided to DC OP staff and stakeholders for final review. The map content was also reviewed and edited in meetings with DC OP staff and stakeholders. The DC SHPO staff participated in site visits to study the pylon locations in relation to memorials and vistas, and the compatibility and visibility of the monochrome pylon.