

STAFF RECOMMENDATION



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DRAFT CAPITALSPACE PLAN IDEAS TO ACHIEVE THE FULL POTENTIAL OF WASHINGTON'S PARKS AND OPEN SPACE

Washington, D.C.

Prepared by
National Capital Planning Commission, the Government of the District of Columbia
and the National Park Service

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Abstract

The draft CapitalSpace plan is a multi-agency partnership initiative between the National Capital Planning Commission, several District agencies including the Office of Planning, the Departments of Parks and Recreation, the Environment, and Transportation, and the National Park Service. CapitalSpace provides a vision for a beautiful, high-quality, and unified park system for the nation's capital and six action-oriented "Big Ideas" focused on key areas to help make the vision a reality. These six Big Ideas identify recommendations that can best be accomplished by the CapitalSpace partner agencies working together and are intended to maximize existing assets, address current and future needs, and capitalize on existing opportunities. They include ideas for new planning and development policies, physical improvements and uses, and coordinated approaches to programming and maintenance. The plan's goals are: to increase access to great local parks; to celebrate the urban parks; to connect with the rivers; to protect, connect and restore natural environments; to expand park system capacity; to link the city with green corridors; and to weave a greenway through neighborhoods.

Authority

Authorization to circulate the October 8, 2009 draft CapitalSpace plan for a 60-day public comment period pursuant to 40 U.S.C. § 8711(a).

Executive Director's Recommendation

The Commission:

Directs staff to circulate the October 8, 2009 draft CapitalSpace plan for a 60-day public comment period for the purposes of obtaining and considering input from federal departments and agencies, state and local governments, regional agencies, and interested organizations and individuals prior to preparation of a final plan for review and approval by the National Capital Planning Commission.

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BACKGROUND AND STAFF EVALUATION

Description of Plan

Washington is a city of parks. With its many large and small neighborhood parks, school yards, formal downtown parks, stream valley corridors, forest preserves, and green river banks of the Potomac and Anacostia, it is graced with more green space per person than any other U.S. city of its size. In addition, while known the world over for the symbolic power of the National Mall, parks and open space throughout Washington's neighborhoods have historic attributes and commemorative features that make them signature elements of the nation's capital.

Although Washington's parks and open space are abundant and beloved, the quality of the parks and open space and their uses has not kept pace with the desires of expanding resident and worker populations or millions of annual visitors. To help address this cooperatively, federal and District of Columbia agencies formed the CapitalSpace partnership.

Recognizing that planning and management efforts are currently underway to enhance the National Mall and parks along the Potomac and Anacostia rivers, CapitalSpace focused on the many challenges of the other national and local parks in the neighborhoods throughout Washington.

The CapitalSpace partner agencies, the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC), the District of Columbia Office of Planning (DCOP) and Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), and the National Park Service (NPS) began by completing the first comprehensive analysis of all of Washington's parks and open space in nearly 40 years. This analysis found that within Washington's park system the wide variety of park types, sizes and traits, coupled with shared jurisdiction between local and federal authorities, presents challenges in meeting both local and national needs and difficulties in planning, enhancing, and maintaining them. Yet the analysis also found that there are tremendous opportunities with Washington's park system to ensure that parks are accessible to everyone who lives in, works in, or visits the city; that they help connect various communities; that they provide a diversity of passive and active recreation; that they provide a diversity of spaces—including natural, cultural, commemorative, and historic spaces; and that they contribute to a healthy, sustainable and livable city.

CapitalSpace provides a vision for a beautiful, high-quality, and unified park system for the nation's capital and six action-oriented "Big Ideas" focused on key areas to help make the vision a reality. These six Big Ideas identify recommendations that can best be accomplished by the CapitalSpace partner agencies working together and are intended to maximize existing assets, address current and future needs, and capitalize on existing opportunities. They include ideas for new planning and development policies, physical improvements and uses, and approaches to operation and maintenance.

The six Big Ideas are:

Linking the Fort Circle Parks by implementing a greenway and making the parks destinations through:

- Promoting the fort parks as national historic, cultural, and recreational treasures and providing opportunities for residents and visitors to explore, interpret, and visualize their history.
- Increasing public access by connecting the fort parks to other parks, schools, neighborhoods, and other destinations.
- Activating the fort parks through selective park uses that engage residents and visitors in their rich natural environment, and cultural history.
- Protecting and celebrating the diverse and significant natural resources of the fort parks.

Improving public schoolyards to help relieve the pressure on nearby parks and better connect kids with the environment through:

- Developing a comprehensive schoolyard improvement strategy that assesses needs, provides standards for improvements, prioritizes projects, and is coordinated with the District's school modernization process.
- Preserving schoolyards for community recreation space and improving access.
- Developing goals for schoolyards including establishing safe and secure play environments, active recreation components, low impact development opportunities, and positive identities.
- Clarifying agency responsibilities for general schoolyard maintenance and developing partnerships to provide for enhancements.

Enhancing urban natural areas and better connecting residents to encourage urban stewardship for natural resources by:

- Ensuring that the natural resources embedded in our parks are protected in our urban environs.
- Adopting clear, consistent, and shared goals and guidelines among responsible agencies and adjacent jurisdictions for long-term park and natural resource management.
- Building a green infrastructure network within our natural areas to perform many of the same services as drainage pipes and spillways.

Improving playfields to meet the needs of residents, workers, and visitors by:

- Maintaining the current level of service for recreation facilities within Washington.
- Increasing capacity through field assessments, use, improvement plans, and capital programs coordinated among responsible agencies.
- Simplifying the permitting process between NPS, DPR, and DCPS and coordinating fees, signage, and enforcement among the responsible agencies.

Enhancing Center City parks and open space to meet support a vibrant downtown through:

- Increasing park use by improving quality, quantity, access and connections.
- Building and strengthening park constituency support through partnerships with individuals, businesses, and organizations.
- Creating unique places for neighborhoods, strengthening the overall identity of parks, and using public spaces around parks to expand programs and amenities.

Transforming small parks into successful public spaces, forming a cohesive urban network of green spaces by:

- Organizing small parks into clusters, where appropriate, to coordinate their uses and physical improvement.
- Coordinating planning and management of small parks among the various park and planning agencies for efficiencies and to promote investments across all small park resources.
- Providing neighborhood-oriented programming and improvements for small parks and ensuring they are clean and safe to enhance neighborhood livability.
- Leveraging related investments and tapping into funding unique to small parks.

CapitalSpace comes at a moment of great opportunity, where local and national leadership is focusing on improvements to urban life, the environment, and community health. CapitalSpace recognizes the positive contributions parks and open space can provide to these elements, and its six Big Ideas contain many recommendations on how these contributions might be improved.

The CapitalSpace partners have committed to continued coordination to ensure that the six Big Idea's recommendations are implemented. As a starting point to achieving the full potential of Washington's parks and open space system, the CapitalSpace partners have identified a priority list of the plan's recommendations for joint action:

- Improve overall access to our public open space.
- Improve the availability and use of our playfields.
- Complete our Fort Circle Parks hiker-biker trail.
- Promote the value of our Fort Circle Parks.
- Ensure our schoolyards meet community recreational needs.
- Make our downtown parks more inviting and active.
- Launch a District-wide ecosystem consortium.
- Improve the maintenance and use of our small parks.

The partners also see an ongoing alliance to identify additional opportunities for coordinating:

- Public information on park and open space resources and recreational opportunities.
- Maintenance contracts.
- Capital budget programming.
- New improvements and programming where public and private investment is already in place.
- Fundraising and partnerships with individuals, businesses and organizations.

Staff's Recommendation

Staff recommends **the Commission reviews the October 8, 2009 draft CapitalSpace plan and directs staff to circulate the draft plan for a 60-day public comment period for the purposes of obtaining and considering input from federal departments and agencies, state and local governments, regional agencies, and interested organizations and individuals prior to preparation of a final plan for review and approval by the Commission.**

PREVIOUS COMMISSION ACTION

Staff briefings on CapitalSpace were provided to the Commission on December 1, 2005; April 5, 2007; and December 4, 2008. The Commission has not yet taken official action on the work completed to date.

CONFORMANCE

No environmental or historic preservation review was undertaken for CapitalSpace because the plan is advisory. Once the plan is adopted and plan recommendations are considered for implementation, appropriate environmental and historic preservation review will be initiated.

CONSULTATION

The lead agencies for the CapitalSpace initiative have been NCPC, NPS, DCOP, and DPR; other agencies, notably the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, the District's Department of the Environment, Department of Transportation, and Office of Public Education Facilities Management, have also been substantially involved. At key points in the plan development process, steering committee meetings were conducted with representatives from these agencies, including both the NPS regional office and the park superintendents of the primary park units within the District.

During the development of the needs assessment, interviews were conducted of key public and private stakeholders. During the development of each of the six big ideas, partner agency staff identified and coordinated with non-profit, business and citizen stakeholder groups to develop background, review materials, and discuss possible recommendations. In particular, case studies using existing park and open space sites were used to provide specific examples and lessons learned in developing the big ideas.

Staff also provided a forum for citizens, interest groups and key stakeholders to identify and provide valuable input on potential opportunities, issues and strategies in the plan. Two public meetings were held on April 5, 2007 and May 20, 2008 at the downtown Martin Luther King Jr. Library. Interested parties have included Washington Parks and People, the Casey Tree Foundation, the Washington Central Parks Alliance, and the business improvement districts in Washington's Center City. A website, www.capitalspace.gov was established, and staff has posted a number of drafts of plan components as they have been reviewed by the partner agencies to provide the public with early opportunities to review these plans.

During the public comment period, staff will conduct a focused public outreach effort to schedule meetings and presentations with interested parties that may wish to comment on the CapitalSpace proposals. The draft CapitalSpace plan will be presented at a public meeting on October 27, 2009 which will be advertised via newspaper and email "blasts." In addition, partner agency staff and the consultant team will be conducting briefings with key stakeholders in advance of a stakeholder workshop scheduled for early November. The workshop is intended to provide focused discussion around moving the plan concepts forward.

After the public comment period closes on December 8, 2009, NCPC and the partner agencies will refine the plan and discuss public comments with the partner agency steering committee. A revised final plan is anticipated to be presented to the Commission at the February 2010 meeting for review and adoption.