

STAFF RECOMMENDATION



S. Dettman

NCPC File No. 6713

WASHINGTON CANAL PARK

Bounded by 2nd Place, 2nd, I and M Streets, SE
Washington, DC

Submitted by the District of Columbia Office of the Deputy Mayor for
Planning and Economic Development

September 24, 2009

Abstract

The District of Columbia Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development on behalf of the Canal Park Development Association has submitted a revised concept design for the Washington Canal Park in southeast Washington, DC. The three-block site encompasses a portion of the former Washington Canal that connected Tiber Creek and the Potomac River with the Anacostia River. The proposed design includes a linear rain garden, combination of large and small open spaces, three pavilions, an urban plaza, and a prominent water feature. The linear rain garden will allow for on-site collection, treatment, and reuse of stormwater runoff from the park and adjacent buildings. In November 2006, the Commission reviewed the previous concept and while commenting favorably on the overall design, it recommended that it be simplified to reduce routine maintenance.

Commission Action Requested by Applicant

Approval of revised concept design pursuant to 40 U.S.C. § 8722(b)(1).

Executive Director's Recommendation

The Commission:

Comments favorably on the revised design concept for the Washington Canal park as shown on NCPC Map File No. 41.10(38.00)42871.

Commends the applicant on a revised concept that is both simple in its design, and high-performing in the range of amenities it will provide to the surrounding community. The revised concept incorporates simple park amenities such as an abundance of flexible open space, plentiful seating, and interactive water features to ensure that the park can be enjoyed by a variety of users. The relative simplicity of the concept design will also assist in long-term maintenance of the park.

Commends the applicant's use of the linear rain garden not only as an environmentally sustainable strategy to collect, treat, and reuse stormwater runoff from the park and future adjacent buildings, but also as a tool to educate the community on ecological and environmental issues, and the historical significance of the site.

Recommends that the applicant incorporate interpretive signage along the rain garden, or an exhibit within the south pavilion, to describe the historic significance of the park site as it relates to the Washington Canal.

Requests the following at the preliminary design stage:

- Additional information on the intended programming and monitoring for both levels of the south pavilion.
- Further developed designs for the three pavilions including materials and lighting scheme.
- Additional information on the Low Impact Development strategies and other sustainable features within the park.
- More fully developed streetscape designs at street edges and crosswalks.
- Lighting design that is complimentary to the surrounding neighborhood, and minimizes spillover and visual impacts to adjacent streets and development.
- Information on long-term plans to operate and maintain the park including the organizations and partnerships that will be involved.
- Information on how Washington Canal Park contributes to the interconnected system of parks and open spaces within the District of Columbia.

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Site

Washington Canal Park will be located on a narrow three-block site in southeast Washington, DC bounded by I Street, SE to the north; 2nd Place, SE to the east; M Street, SE to the south; and 2nd Street, SE to the west. The relatively flat, two-acre park space is divided into three separate blocks by K Street, SE and L Street, SE. The site is owned by the federal government and is under the administrative jurisdiction of the District of Columbia for recreation purposes. Until recently the property was used as a parking area for school buses. To begin preparing the site for

construction of the park, these vehicles were removed along with the asphalt that covered much of the site, the surrounding chain link fence, and the overgrown vegetation. The site is situated in the heart of an area of the city that is experiencing a major revitalization due in large part to the relocation of the United States Department of Transportation (DOT) headquarters, located directly south across M Street, SE, and construction of the new baseball stadium. The land that surrounds the future park is mostly vacant with some development along its western border. However, plans already exist to develop the surrounding land with a mix of uses that will have a high percentage of residential.

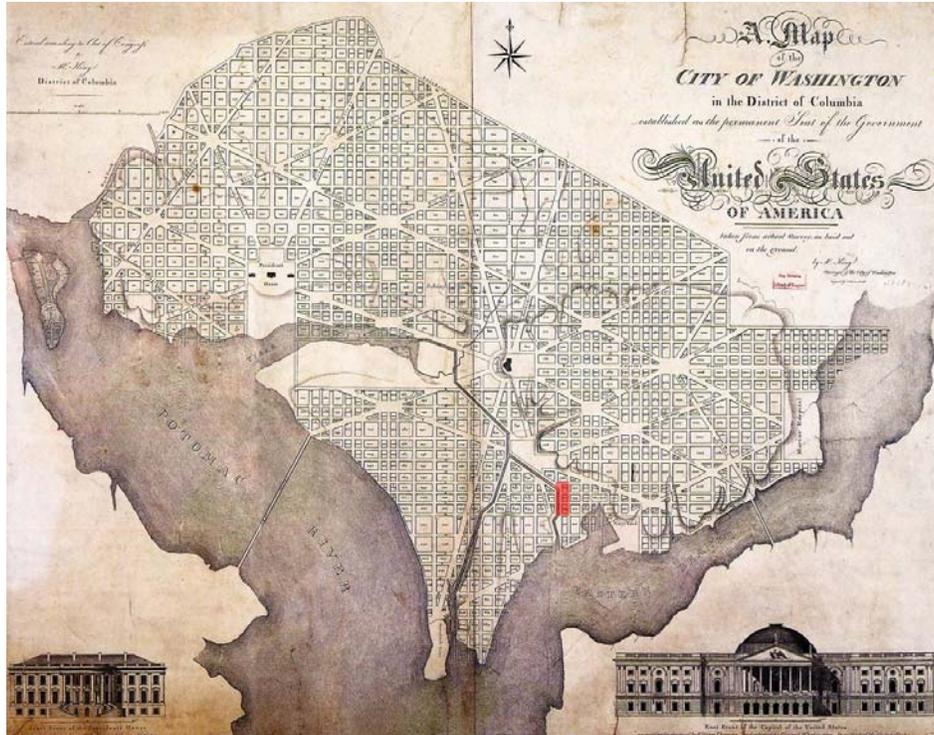


Project Area Map

Background

The original plan for Washington by Pierre Charles L'Enfant in 1794 included a canal that connected the Potomac River with the Anacostia River. Upon completion in 1815, the Washington Canal proceeded east from the Potomac River along what is today Constitution Avenue. At Pennsylvania Avenue, the canal turned south along 3rd Street at the base of Capitol Hill. The canal then made its way along Washington Avenue and South Capitol Street before ultimately connecting to the Anacostia River. While the original intent of the canal was for the movement of commercial goods between the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers, its use for such purposes was relatively short-lived due to the increasing use of the railroad to transport goods, and to difficulties maintaining the canal. Since Washington did not have a public sewer system at the time, the poorly maintained and underutilized canal ultimately became a place for residents to dump their garbage and sewage and quickly became a public nuisance and health hazard. In 1872, the head of the DC Board of Public Works, Alexander "Boss" Shepherd, filled in and

paved over the canal as part of a large-scale public improvement project to upgrade Washington’s infrastructure. Today, little evidence remains of the original Washington Canal that ran along where Constitution Avenue now exists with the exception of the Lock Keeper’s house located at 17th Street and Constitution Avenue, NW.



Historic map showing location of Washington Canal and site of proposed park



Historic image of Washington Canal taken near the U.S. Capitol Building

Although the current economic crisis has slowed development activity, the area where the proposed Washington Canal Park will be located is currently experiencing a major transformation. The relocation of the United States Department of Transportation headquarters, redevelopment of the Southeast Federal Center, and the construction of Nationals Park has spurred the development of several thousand residential dwelling units, several commercial office buildings, as well as retail and entertainment venues. The land that immediately surrounds the proposed park will eventually contain over 1,000 dwellings and well over a million square feet of commercial and retail space. Upon completion, this area is anticipated to become one of Washington's most vibrant neighborhoods with Washington Canal Park serving as a social nexus and community gathering space.

The National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) reviewed the previous concept design for Washington Canal Park in November 2006. NCPC commented favorably on the overall design concept and commended the design team for their dedication to using Low Impact Development (LID) design strategies in order to minimize the effects of stormwater runoff. The Commission recommended that the design be simplified and that consideration be given to materials and elements that would be more durable and require less routine maintenance.



Project area showing existing and planned development types that immediately surround the site

Proposal

The revised concept plan for Washington Canal Park will transform this three-block site into a vibrant community focal point that will provide a much needed recreational amenity to this burgeoning mixed-use community. The design takes into consideration the present and future

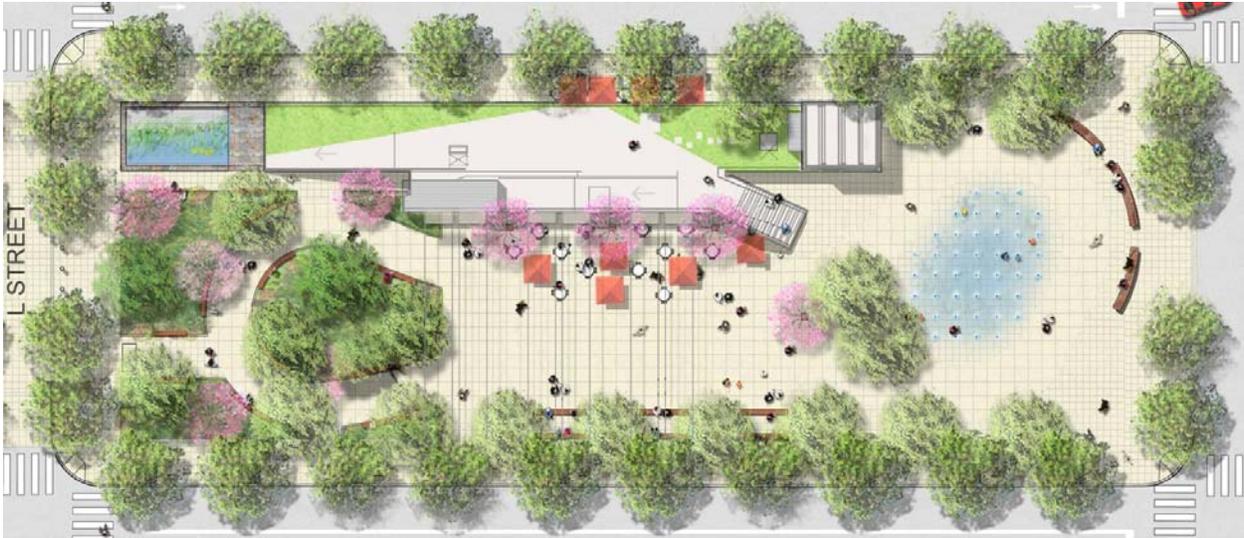
needs of those that live, work, and visit the surrounding neighborhood, while at the same time creatively incorporating elements of the site's historical significance. Through a range of programming including a restaurant with outdoor seating, an interactive fountain, flexible open space, a seasonal ice rink, and a children's play area, each block will possess its own unique identity that will accommodate a wide-range of activities. A linear rain garden, a reference to the former canal, will tie each of the three blocks together into one cohesive experience. Since the park will be constructed well in advance of the full build out of the surrounding community, a key design consideration was the need to create a destination that is flexible enough to accommodate the change that will unquestionably occur in the years to come. Therefore, although the spaces allocated throughout the park respond to specific program requirements defined by stakeholder input, they have been designed in a manner that allows them to remain flexible and able to accommodate change.



Revised concept design for Washington Canal Park

The Southern Block (Block One)

The southern block is the most “urban” of the three blocks and will be anchored by a significant, interactive water feature, large pavilion, and an ice skating rink in the winter. The water feature will be design in a manner that will allow the space it occupies to be used as a performance area when the fountain is turned off, or as a seasonal plant display in the winter months. The block will also contain a large, two-level pavilion that will serve as a café and observation area for people to relax and look out over the park. The pavilion is situated along the eastern side of the block at the terminus of a linear rain garden that runs along the entire eastern length of the park. Immediately west of the pavilion is a large, open air plaza that can be used for a wide-range of formal and informal activities. Movable tables and chairs can be placed in this area to provide seating for visitors and patrons of the café. In the summer months this area will be shaded by canopies pulled across the plaza. Immediately north of the plaza shade trees, plant beds, and a curvilinear pathway provide a less urban feel and begin the transition to the next block. During the winter months the fountain area, plaza, and northern pathway will be transformed into an ice skating rink with loops at the north and south ends of the block, inspired by the linear skating canal waterways found throughout the world. The ice skating rink will measure approximately 10,000 square feet in size with the plaza outside the pavilion serving as the main skating area.



Site plan of southern block (Summer months)



Site plan for southern block (Winter months)



Examples of activities planned for the southern block



Examples of the type of seating and shade structure envisioned for the south plaza



View of pavilion from southwest corner



View of pavilion from southeast corner

The Middle Block (Block Two)

Block two transitions from the harder surfaces of the southern block into a slightly greener, park-like setting. One of the focal points of this block is a small pavilion that hovers above a plane of cascading water. The pavilion serves as a bridge from the sidewalk into the center of the park. Opposite the pavilion is a small panel of lawn that is surrounded on three sides by a broad bench where people can relax during their lunch break. The bench also provides a nice enclosure to allow this area to be used as a children's play area. To the north, a larger, flexible lawn area provides space for informal gatherings, and special events such as weekly farmers' markets and small festivals.



Site plan of middle block



Examples of activities planned for the middle block

The Northern Block (Block Three)

The northern block of the park can be considered the most pastoral given the large, open lawn panel that encompasses a sizable proportion of the block. A slight grade change from north to south makes this area perfect for the congregation of significant numbers of people to enjoy summer movies and concerts. Placing a stage or movie screen at the southern end of the block will allow the gently sloping lawn to act as an informal amphitheater; providing a place for people to stand or sit with unobstructed views. A third pavilion is proposed along the northern

end of the linear rain garden. During the non-winter months, folding canvas chairs will be rented out of this pavilion. North of the lawn panel, the park transitions back to meet I Street, SE in a more urbane fashion with a bosque of trees set in stone enclosures.



Site plan of northern block



Examples of activities planned for the northern block

The Linear Rain Garden

The three blocks will be tied together by a rain garden running north/south along the park's eastern edge. The garden will function as a stormwater collection basin by filtering and directing runoff from the park, and the roofs of future adjacent buildings, into an underground storage tank. This water will be used to fulfill the majority of the park's irrigation demands. The types of plantings used within the garden will be representative of the ecological succession of plant communities. Plants will range from open water aquatic species in the southern block, edge

condition species in the middle block, to forest species in the northern block. Finally, from a historical standpoint the garden is an acknowledgment of the former canal that once occupied the site. The long, linear shape of the garden references the canal's form. The three pavilions that punctuate the garden are an extrusion of this form, and also represent abstractions of the boats and barges that once plied along Washington's canal system.

Development Program

In October 2008, the Canal Park Development Corporation (CPDC) and the District of Columbia Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development (DMPED) signed an agreement making CPDA the responsible entity for construction and management of Washington Canal Park. CPDA is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization established specifically for the purpose of promoting, designing, fundraising, building and maintaining the park. Currently, it is anticipated that construction of the park will begin in March 2010 following design review, construction bidding, and the necessary permitting. Construction of the park will last approximately one year. Following completion of the park, CPDA will operate and maintain the park for a period of 20 years. CPDA is also exploring a partnership with the Capitol Riverfront Business Improvement District for additional maintenance and programming of the park.

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Executive Summary

The revised design concept for the Washington Canal Park reflects a successful integration of history, stakeholder programmatic needs, and environmentally sustainable practices. The overall design of the park is simplistic in its forms, features, and materials; which will ease long-term upkeep and maintenance costs. For example, unlike the previous design concept this proposal utilizes a simple, low-maintenance collection of paving materials such as precast concrete pavers and decomposed granite. Water features within the park also appear to be less complex than what was previously proposed; and the use of the linear rain garden to passively treat the park's stormwater runoff will lower demand on the city's infrastructure, and reduce the amount of water necessary for park irrigation. In addition, the lack of period specific amenities that may be short-lived, or cater to a particular user, will allow the park to remain timeless and adapt as the needs of the community change. The abundance of passive open space is a noteworthy feature of the park as it will provide flexible spaces that can accommodate a wide range of passive and active recreational activities. Use of the northern block for outdoor movies, concerts, and special events is an effective use of the site's natural grade and will help establish this evolving community. Finally, the café will provide a new social gathering place for residents of the neighborhood, visitors to the park, and for those who work nearby.

Staff's analysis of the proposed concept design has identified some areas that the applicant is encouraged to explore further while moving on to preliminary and final design. These areas include:

Impacts to Views Along Historic L'Enfant Streets

While the success of Washington Canal Park is to some degree dependent upon seamlessly integrating three separate city blocks into a unified whole, it is important that this be done in a manner that does not result in unnecessary intrusions into the historic L'Enfant rights-of-way that exist within the project area. Careful consideration needs to be given to the views and visual quality along these streets when designing and locating park pavilions, placing features along the curbside, and selecting paving materials. The width and visual openness of these rights-of-way should be maintained.

Size and Design of Southern Block Pavilion

The design of the southern block pavilion must be given careful consideration so as not to overwhelm the other elements of the park. Including a venue similar to what is found in the National Gallery of Art Sculpture Garden will provide a strong focal point and prominent gathering space within the park. However, its design should not be so unique that it loses its relationship with the rest of the park and instead becomes a stand alone feature located on the edge of the park. The scale and massing of the pavilion should express the same simplicity that is characteristic of the overall design of the park, while its architectural detail can remain modern and similar to the other two pavilions. Furthermore, the inclusion of a second story observation post could create problems related to maintenance and public safety. Therefore, prior to advancing the idea of a second level, considerable thought should be given to the actual programming and monitoring of this space.

Park Maintenance

Maintenance of the site will be of utmost importance for the park to successfully become a true social nexus for residents of the community and those that work in the area. While the applicant should continue to use Low Impact Development strategies and environmentally sustainable materials, it is important that the use of these materials not compromise durability and longevity.

Definition of Southern Edge of Park

As proposed, the southern edge of the park has no real definition and lacks a sense of entry. As the "urban" edge to the park this end could be embellished, and delineated more from the sidewalk and street right-of-way, in order to give visitors a sense of detachment from the traffic along M Street, SE and the commercial uses that exist along this corridor.

Pedestrian Safety and Accessibility

Due to the different programmatic elements distributed throughout each of the three blocks, pedestrian safety while moving between blocks will require careful consideration and attention to detail. Staff is pleased to see that the revised concept plan maintains K and L Streets, SE for both pedestrian and vehicular travel. In order to ensure the safety of pedestrians when crossing these streets, the applicant should incorporate design features that naturally lead pedestrians to designated crosswalks and discourage mid-block crossings.

Consistency of Streetscape Design

Ensuring that the streetscape along the edges of the park complements that which is currently being constructed in the surrounding area will integrate the park into the community, and help foster a safe environment by maintaining a streetscape that is familiar to residents and visitors. Close coordination with the District of Columbia Department of Transportation will be necessary to determine the correct type of light standards, sidewalk paving and pattern, street tree species, and other curbside furnishings. Consideration should be given to the park's location, surrounding streets, and relevant standards such as the Anacostia Waterfront Transportation Architecture Design Standards.

Lighting

Lighting for the site, including the pavilions, will have a major influence on the overall security of the site, and the success of its use during evening hour programming. Lighting should also be responsive to the adjacent residential community by avoiding excessive spillover into those areas.

Washington Canal Exhibit or Interpretive Signage

The Washington Canal has a unique place in the history of the nation's capital and its story provides a cultural education opportunity that should be taken advantage of whenever possible. The inclusion of the linear rain garden as a symbolic gesture to the former canal could perhaps be strengthened through the use of a minimal amount of interpretive signage either along the garden or within the large pavilion.

CONFORMANCE

Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital

The proposed concept development plan is not inconsistent with the Federal Elements of the Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital. The project advances the policies contained within the Parks and Open Space Element as they pertain to the establishment of new parks that augment the city's current system of parks and open spaces, and the maintenance and use of small urban parks to hold special events, display civic art, and create focal points to encourage informal gatherings.

Monumental Core Framework Plan

Although Washington Canal Park is technically outside the study area of the Monumental Core Framework Plan (Framework Plan) it does advance some of the Framework Plan's guiding themes and strategies that are applicable to the city as a whole as sound planning and design principles. The revised concept plan for Washington Canal Park is consistent with the Framework Plan's recommended strategy of creating an interconnected open-space network that establishes walkable links among parks and plazas, and the provision of multi-purpose spaces that can accommodate events and recreation. Like the Framework Plan, the revised concept also recognizes the importance of promoting environmental sustainability in the urban environment

through the use of LID techniques; and strategies that improve stormwater management, improve urban habitats, and increase the tree canopy within urban areas.

CapitalSpace

The revised concept design for Washington Canal Park is consistent with several of the Center City Park recommendations contained within CapitalSpace. These recommendations encourage the expansion of programs and amenities; use of public art, landscaping, and outdoor seating to connect activities in parks to adjacent neighborhoods; and the use of sustainable design features in new and existing parks. The CapitalSpace initiative also recommends the use of increased signage, promotions, and programming to build an understanding and appreciation of park and neighborhood history. The revised design concept incorporates all of these recommendations.

CONSULTATION

Coordinating Committee

The Coordinating Committee reviewed the proposal at its September 9, 2009 meeting, and forwarded it to the Commission with the statement that the proposal has been coordinated with all participating agencies. The participating agencies included: NCPC; the National Park Service, the General Services Administration; the District of Columbia Office of Planning; the District Department of Transportation; the Department of Housing and Community Development; and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.

Commission of Fine Arts

At its meeting on September 17, 2009, the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts (CFA) approved the revised concept design for Washington Canal Park. Overall, CFA was encouraged by the simplicity of the revised concept design. CFA asked that the applicant look for ways to provide additional shade around some of the seating areas and near the main fountain at the southern end of the park. The applicant was also asked to study the relationship between the children's play area and the pavilion proposed for the middle block; as well as the use of particular paving materials throughout the park, specifically the use of concrete pavers. Finally, CFA noted that the design and actual programming of the south pavilion needed refinement.