

STAFF RECOMMENDATION



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NCPC File No. 6919

FEDERAL TRIANGLE HERITAGE TRAIL ASSESSMENT STUDY

Washington, DC

Submitted by the National Capital Planning Commission

February 25, 2010

Abstract

In September 2008, the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) partnered with Cultural Tourism DC (CTDC), a local not-for-profit that specializes in the development of Neighborhood Heritage Trails within Washington, DC, to evaluate the feasibility of developing a heritage trail for the Federal Triangle. This self-guided walking tour would highlight the art, architecture, history, commemoration, and governmental functions within the Federal Triangle, with reference to the uses of the land that predate the federal installations. The purpose of this study is to provide a preliminary look at the research, outreach, collaboration, and resources that would be necessary to design and implement a Federal Triangle heritage trail. The report will inform future heritage trail planning efforts and can be used to garner federal and local support for the project, and identify potential funding sources. A Federal Triangle heritage trail will satisfy a long-held desire of the federal and local governments, as well as city residents, to put on display an area of Washington that has strong local and national significance, and to better connect the National Mall to the City of Washington.

Commission Action Requested by Applicant

Review of the Federal Triangle Heritage Trail Assessment Study, pursuant to 40 U.S.C. § 8711 et. seq.

Executive Director's Recommendation

The Commission:

Reviews the Federal Triangle Heritage Trail Assessment Study as shown on NCPC Map File No. 1.23(00.00)42725.

Comments favorably on the goals and objectives of the project to highlight the art; architecture; and social, cultural, and governmental history of the Federal Triangle, as well as improve pedestrian connections throughout the Federal Triangle, and between downtown and the National Mall.

Notes the importance of coordinating the Federal Triangle heritage trail with the District of Columbia's existing system of Neighborhood Heritage Trails through consistent signage, graphic design, information presentation, and trail development process.

Directs staff to pursue implementation of the project by:

- Meeting with federal and local agencies to identify the necessary funding to develop and maintain the Federal Triangle heritage trail.
- Garnering support for the project from federal and local agencies, and identify which agency will take the lead role in carrying out the project.
- Working with the lead agency to define the timeframe for implementation, and, if necessary, prepare a Request for Proposals to identify a contractor to carry out implementation of the project.
- Beginning public outreach to educate interested stakeholders on the project, and solicit their interest in participating during the planning, research, and design phases.
- Meeting with federal and local agencies to determine what public space and permitting rules and regulations exist within the study area

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Site

The study area for this report is commonly known as the Federal Triangle, and also includes areas immediately north of Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, and south of Constitution Avenue, NW. This boundary is consistent with the Federal Triangle precinct of the recently adopted Monumental Core Framework Plan.

Background

The idea of a self-guided tour through the Federal Triangle that would link downtown and the National Mall was



Project site and surrounding context

originally conceived in the 1982 Federal Triangle Master Plan, a product of the General Services Administration (GSA). According to this plan, the “Federal Walk”, as it was called then, would educate visitors on the historic significance, architectural treasures, and governmental functions of the Federal Triangle. The 1988 Federal Triangle Master Plan update reinforces this idea, and states that “this walk would be a series of attractions, or destinations that taken as a whole would provide a picture of the Triangle’s richness and variety, yet when taken individually would provide a number of important points of interest.” GSA further acknowledged the importance of implementing the Federal Walk when, despite the growing concern for security in the federal workplace, it preserved this idea in its report “Urban Design Guidelines for Physical Perimeter and Entrance Security: An Overlay to the Master Plan for the Federal Triangle.” Most recently, the notion of implementing a self-guided walking tour through the Federal Triangle was included in the *Monumental Core Framework Plan: Connecting New Destinations to the National Mall*, prepared by the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) and the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts (CFA). This plan not only recognizes the value of such a tour in showcasing the rich cultural, social, and governmental history of this area of the nation’s capital, it also seeks to maximize its potential to improve connections between the National Mall, the Federal Triangle, and downtown Washington, DC.

In September 2008, the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) partnered with Cultural Tourism DC (CTDC), a local not-for-profit that specializes in the development of Neighborhood Heritage Trails within Washington, DC, to evaluate the feasibility of developing a heritage trail for the Federal Triangle. This self-guided walking tour would highlight the art, architecture, history, commemoration, and governmental functions within the Federal Triangle, with reference to the uses of the land that predate the federal installations.

The purpose of this study is to provide a preliminary look at the research, outreach, collaboration, and resources that would be necessary to design and implement a Federal Triangle heritage trail. The study will inform future heritage trail planning efforts and can be used to garner federal and local support for the project, and identify potential funding sources. A Federal Triangle heritage trail will satisfy a long-held desire of the federal and local governments, as well as city residents, to put on display an area of Washington that has strong local and national significance, and to better connect the National Mall to the City of Washington.

Proposal

The creation of a Federal Triangle heritage trail is a unique opportunity to educate residents, workers, and visitors on the rich and diverse cultural and social assets that make up this area. At the same time, the heritage trail can serve to better connect this federal precinct to the rest of the city by opening up new passages for pedestrian circulation, making public spaces more accessible, and reducing the monumentality of the area at the pedestrian level by providing a familiar system of wayfinding signage.

The heritage trail would do more than just demonstrate that the Federal Triangle is a set of grand buildings. It would focus on its role as home to important functions of the federal and local governments carried out by dedicated public servants. In describing the area’s development history before construction of the monumental buildings we see today, the trail would describe

the influence this land had on the surrounding areas, and on the overall development of the city of Washington as both the nation's capital and a familiar, American city.

By inviting tourists to expand their visit to the National Mall, and by offering a pleasant and healthful walk for those who work in the area, the heritage trail would animate the many public areas of the Federal Triangle. By linking to the city's existing system of Neighborhood Heritage Trails, it would encourage tourists to appreciate the rest of the city, bring more revenue to local government and businesses, and aid workers and nearby residents in the full enjoyment of downtown Washington. Moreover, it could improve east-west connections within the Federal Triangle, and facilitate north-south pedestrian circulation between the downtown, Federal Triangle, National Mall, and Southwest Washington.

Development Program

Based on CTDC's experience implementing DC Neighborhood Heritage Trails, development of the Federal Triangle heritage trail could be completed over a 22-month period. This time period assumes that the design of the trail signs will be consistent with the District's existing system of Neighborhood Heritage Trails, and therefore does not allot time for a new design. As described more fully in the Assessment Study, a new sign design is not recommended given the impacts this could have on accomplishing one of the most important goals of the project, to create better pedestrian connections between downtown and the National Mall through a consistent set of wayfinding signs.

The Assessment Study breaks down the implementation timeline for the project into four components: content and design; agency coordination; sign fabrication; and permitting and installation. The content and design component includes those project activities that deal with public outreach, development of heritage trail content, and design of the sign panels. The agency coordination component outlines the schedule of federal and local coordination and review that will be necessary to implement the project. Finally, the sign fabrication, and permitting and installation components describe the process of manufacturing and installing the actual heritage trail signs. The timeline is broken into components in order to show what project activities can take place concurrently, and to help identify areas where the project can be fast-tracked once design of the heritage trail begins.

Based on 2009 pricing, the cost to implement the Federal Triangle heritage trail would be approximately \$500,000. This estimate includes planning, design, fabrication, and installation of a 23-sign trail; design and printing of guidebooks (English and Spanish versions); and the production of a downloadable audio tour. Similar to the suggested implementation timeline, this cost estimate is based on the past experiences of CTDC in designing and implementing the existing system of DC Neighborhood Heritage Trails.

CONFORMANCE

Extending the Legacy

NCPC's *Extending the Legacy Plan* acknowledges the enormous potential the Federal Triangle has to be an important destination in the nation's capital. The Legacy Plan envisions a Federal Triangle animated at the ground-floor level with shops, exhibits, and other attractions for residents, workers, and visitors. Also included in this vision is a self-guided walking trail that ties together the area's many parks, plazas, and public spaces. According to the Legacy Plan, "opening the interior courtyards of these buildings would create a Federal Walk from 9th to 15th Streets, connecting the Old Post Office to the new Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center and the Ellipse. This network of interior pedestrian streets would complement adjacent grand avenues."

Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital

Several policies contained in the Comprehensive Plan support the development of the Federal Triangle heritage trail. For example, the federal workplace, preservation and historic features, and visitor elements each contain policies that encourage the federal government to locate publically accessible exhibits, provide educational opportunities, and improve pedestrian access in and around federal facilities. The following policies are directly applicable to the implementation of the Federal Triangle heritage trail:

- Provide and maintain space for activities that encourage public access to and stimulate public pedestrian traffic around, into, and through federal facilities. Shops, restaurants, exhibits, residential, and other public activities that stimulate pedestrian street life surrounding facilities in urban areas should be considered.
- Locate publicly accessible activities within federal workplaces on public streets and other pedestrian access levels, as well as within courtyards and on rooftops.
- Encourage the use of federal workplaces for occasional cultural, educational, and/or recreational activities, providing suitable space and equipment for such activities.
- Identify and protect historic properties and disseminate information about their significance to the public.
- Encourage exhibits and other educational activities and events in lobbies and public areas of government buildings to inspire and educate visitors about the role of government.
- Promote a pedestrian friendly monumental core and improved pedestrian access to neighborhoods and federal visitor attractions within the nation's capital through the development of sidewalks, streetscape enhancements, and ground level retail or other amenities.
- Encourage specialized information, learning aids, and tours at federal visitor attractions for groups such as school children or international visitors

Monumental Core Framework Plan

Enhancing the public realm of the Federal Triangle is one of the key improvements focused on in the *Monumental Core Framework Plan*. The Framework Plan advocates for the establishment of a welcoming interconnected system of streets, introduction of sustainable public spaces, and improvement of the pedestrian experience throughout this area of the city. One way the Framework Plan recommends to do this is to weave together the Federal Triangle's parks, public spaces, and civic art with a flexible and easy-to-use heritage trail that showcases the history, art, and architecture of the Federal Triangle, including a narrative about American governance. The preparation of this assessment report is the first step towards implementing this recommendation.

Relevant Federal Facility Master Plan

As described above, the idea of a self-guided tour through the Federal Triangle that would link downtown and the National Mall was originally conceived in the 1982 Federal Triangle Master Plan, a product of GSA. The 1988 Federal Triangle Master Plan update reinforced this idea. Therefore, implementation of the Federal Triangle Heritage Trail would be consistent with the master plan.

National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) and National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA)

Compliance with NEPA and Section 106 of the NHPA is not required for purposes of the Commission reviewing this Assessment Study. The purpose of the study is to guide the future design and implementation of the Federal Triangle Heritage Trail and staff is not requesting the Commission to adopt this document. However, the future design and implementation of the heritage trail will be subject to the Commission's approval as a project located on federal land within the District of Columbia. Therefore, at that time NCPC will be required to carry out its NEPA and Section 106 responsibilities.

COORDINATION

By memorandum addressed to NCPC Executive Director, Marcel Acosta, GSA Commissioner, Robert Peck, expressed GSA's long standing support for the concept of a self-guided walking tour in the Federal Triangle (see attachment). In addition, the memorandum indicates that GSA is currently exploring ways to move forward with the trail's implementation. Staff looks forward to working with GSA to assist in this important endeavor.