

IMPROVEMENTS TO
COLUMBUS CIRCLE AND COLUMBUS PLAZA

Massachusetts Avenue and 1st Street, NE, Washington, D.C.

Finding of No Significant Impact

APR 30 2009

I have evaluated the preliminary and final site development plans for the proposed changes to the vehicular circulation, pedestrian flow, and landscape at Columbus Circle and Plaza in Washington, D.C., as shown on NCPC Map File No. 1.11(41.00)-42368. I find that the mitigation, noted as follows, is adequate to establish that the project would not significantly affect the human environment. The necessary mitigation action is the development of a temporary construction vibration protection and monitoring plan for the Columbus Memorial Fountain to be submitted by the District Department of Transportation to the National Park Service as part of its permitting activity for construction on National Park Service property.

The District of Columbia State Historic Preservation Officer has reviewed the project plans in accordance with the requirements of Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and has determined that the project will have no adverse effect on cultural resources, including Union Station, the Columbus Memorial Fountain, and the L'Enfant Plan.

Consequently, after review of the environmental assessment, I have determined pursuant to Section 102(2)(C) of the National Environmental Policy Act, the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations (40 CFR, Parts 1500-1508), and Section 10 of the Commission's Environmental and Historic Preservation Policies

and Procedures, that the project would not significantly affect the quality of the human environment.


Marcel C. Acosta
Executive Director

Background

This project was initiated by the Union Station Redevelopment Corporation in order to improve the appearance of Columbus Plaza in front of Union Station, and to improve the safety of pedestrians by separating the movement of vehicles and pedestrians. The project is jointly funded by the three entities with jurisdiction over portions of the site: the Union Station Redevelopment Corporation, which controls the roadways along the main station building; the District of Columbia Department of Transportation, which controls roadways leading to the station; and the National Park Service, which controls Columbus Plaza. The Architect of the Capitol controls adjacent property.

NCPC was a cooperating agency in the development of the Environmental Assessment (EA) to assist decision-making by evaluating the potential impacts on the environment of the proposed site improvements. NCPC has adopted the National Park Service's EA. The environmental documentation is consistent with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, as amended, the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations implementing NEPA [40 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 1500-1508], the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966, as amended, and NCPC's Environmental and Historic Preservation Policies and Procedures (adopted April 1, 2004).

The District of Columbia State Historic Preservation Office (DC SHPO) completed its analysis of the project, determining that no adverse effects result from the undertaking. The DC SHPO has issued its conclusion as required by Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and has completed compliance reviews for the project.

The NCPC, in compliance with NEPA, will announce its finding on the project on its website with the Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). The EA, and comments about the EA analysis, is information that is made available for review at NCPC offices in compliance with the requirements of NEPA and the Commission's implementing Environmental and Historic

Preservation Policies and Procedures. Additionally, the Commission's Tentative Agenda for the Commission's May 7, 2009 meeting contained a notice regarding review of the proposed project.

NCPC's requirements for a FONSI are set forth in the Environmental and Historic Preservation Policies and Procedures at Section 10(E).

Proposed Action

The proposed action is the implementation of the design and construction of site and roadway improvements to Columbus Circle and Columbus Plaza. The improvements include radial pedestrian walkways that will be extended to Massachusetts Avenue, giving further emphasis to the Beaux Arts-style geometry of the site. A revised pedestrian and bicycle circulation system responds to the new bicycle transit center on the west side of Union Station. On the east side of the plaza, where existing traffic creates conflicts with pedestrians, the road alignment will be adjusted and a raised crosswalk constructed. Traffic islands in Massachusetts Avenue will be extended and reoriented to improve pedestrian safety. Curbs will be lowered at the sidewalk and islands in front of Union Station for the improved convenience of pedestrians with wheeled luggage. Designated bike lanes will be added along Massachusetts Avenue, connecting to the Metropolitan Branch Trail and its southern terminus at Union Station.

Proposed landscape improvements were guided by the National Park Service, which is retaining the extant historic elements and historic fabric of the plaza. The pedestrian plaza will be improved, and pedestrians separated from vehicles, by the removal of the interior access road. The original brick herringbone pavement will be retained, with replacement of damaged bricks where needed. The brick paving pattern will be used in a complementary color in the extension of the pedestrian paths. Brick pavement will also be used for most of the median islands, except where bicycle routes must be differentiated. The sidewalk along the front facade of Union Station will be extended outward to accommodate the installation of perimeter security (which was the subject of a related project approved by the Commission in October 2008). The paving and scoring will match the existing concrete sidewalk. Additional trees and landscaped areas will be established along the plaza and the circle adjacent to Massachusetts Avenue. The flagpoles flying the state flags will be retained in place.

Alternatives considered in the EA review

The EA examines in detail two alternatives: the proposed action, and the no-action alternative.

Other Alternatives Considered during project development.

Two other alternatives were examined but eliminated during the project concept development and are noted in the EA. The alternative development designs would have some adverse impact on the historic plaza features and its landscaped setting, and were found not to adhere to the purpose and need for the project in the context of traffic solutions, particularly involving bus traffic to Union Station.

Potential impacts

NCPC staff has found no significant or adverse environmental impacts with the proposed action. Those that exist are short term construction effects addressed by mitigation through project construction process actions that are presented in the EA and implemented in the final project plans as submitted.

Changes to cultural resources of the environment are limited and were addressed by the District of Columbia Historic Preservation Officer on March 18, 2008, with a finding of No Adverse Effect.

Standard for evaluation

Under NEPA, the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations, and NCPC Environmental and Historic Preservation Policies and Procedures, an EA is sufficient and an Environmental Impact Statement need not be prepared if the EA supports a finding that the federal action will not significantly affect the human environment. The regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality define “significantly” as used in NEPA as requiring consideration of both context and intensity of impacts as noted by 40 CFR §1508.27.

Applying the standards, factors, and analysis here, the Executive Director must make the assessment of whether approval of the submitted site improvements design will “significantly” affect the human environment based on the EA and the mitigation specified by the EA. This is a site-specific action, and the Executive Director looks at the effects on the locale. In regard to intensity, with the mitigation specified in the EA and exhibited in the design drawings, the proposal minimizes and does not present any major or significant adverse effects. The resulting exchange of minor land parcels are transfers of jurisdiction over properties within the District of Columbia owned by the United States or the District, among or between federal and District authorities, pursuant to 40 U.S.C. 8124(a) and, based on the analysis of the EA, have no significant environmental impact.

NCPC is taking an action on a project on federal land in its consideration of the preliminary and final site development plans for improvements at Columbus Circle and Columbus Plaza, which requires adoption of the EA that analyzes attributes and issues of possible environmental impacts, in accordance with Section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, and the Environmental Policies and Procedures implemented by NCPC.