

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

D. Hamilton

NCPC File No. 2326



**DEPARTMENT OF STATE
CHANCERY OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA
PRELIMINARY SITE AND BUILDING PLANS
International Center, Connecticut Avenue and Van Ness Street, NW**

Submission by the Department of State

January 29, 2004

Abstract

The Department of State has submitted preliminary site and building plans for the Chancery of the People's Republic of China to be developed at the International Center in northwest Washington, D.C. The Chancery will house no consular (visas, passports, etc.) or residential functions and will function only as a chancery.

Commission Action Requested by Applicant

Approval of preliminary site and building plans pursuant to Section 4 of the International Center Act, Public Law 90-553.

Executive Director's Recommendation

The Commission:

Approves the preliminary site and building plans for the Chancery of the People's Republic of China, International Center, Connecticut Avenue and Van Ness Street NW, as shown on NCPC Map File No. 72.10(64.10)41301.

Recommends that, in the preparation of final site and building plans, the Department of State:

- Ensure that there is sufficient landscaping along the north façade of the Chancery to visually soften the impact of the wall surfaces that face Van Ness Street.
- Provide improved pedestrian access from International Place to the Central Park, due to the reconfiguration of the parking area.

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BACKGROUND AND STAFF EVALUATION

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSAL

Background

The Department of State has submitted preliminary site and building plans for the development of the Chancery of the People's Republic of China at the International Center, Connecticut Avenue and Van Ness Street, NW.

Development Program

Applicant: U. S. Department of State
Architect: Pei Partnership Architects with I. M. Pei Architect
Cost: Information not available
Schedule: Information not available

- The Chancery would contain approximately 300,000 square feet of space. No consular or residential functions would be housed in the new Chancery.
- Parking for 111 vehicles would be provided in the sub-levels of the building and four additional visitor spaces would be provided in the entry court area.
- An existing parking area used by visitors to the Federal Office Building on International Place would be reconfigured to enhance the approach to the Chancery.

Site

- The site of the proposed embassy is on Lot #12 at the International Center. This lot is bounded on the north by Van Ness Street; on the south by International Place, the existing Federal Office Building, and the site for the future embassy of Morocco; on the east by the Embassy of Singapore; and on the west by International Drive.
- The site is approximately 3 acres and slopes approximately 30 feet from International Place on the south towards Van Ness Street on the north. It also slopes approximately 18 feet from the west, at Van Ness Street and International Drive, to the east towards Connecticut Avenue. The site is currently an open lawn area.
- Access to the site is via Van Ness Street, International Drive, and International Place. Existing traffic direction on International Place is from east to west and then north to south in a counter-clockwise direction. The proposal would require the reversal of this movement to a clockwise direction.

- The proposal would also reconfigure and re-landscape the existing 90-degree parking area located on the west side of the Central Park to provide a more dignified approach to the entrance of the new chancery building.

Architectural Design

- The overall architectural design of the chancery is derived from a contemporary interpretation of traditional Chinese architectural precepts in terms of the placement of the buildings, exterior and interior spatial sequences and the use of gardens and exterior spaces with the objective of creating a balance between the built form and the landscape.
- The chancery building is comprised of three distinct building elements—the West Office Wing (adjacent to the Federal Office Building), the East Office Wing (adjacent to the Embassy of Singapore), and the Entrance Pavilion that links the two office wings.
- As a result of the sloping site, the West and East Office Wings are 3 stories high on the south side and 5 stories high on the north side. The Entrance Pavilion is on axis with the north / south portion of International Place on the south.
- The Entrance Pavilion derives its form from traditional Chinese imperial architecture. The West and East Office Wings are simpler structures that flank the Entrance Pavilion. The geometry of the plan of the Entrance Pavilion is reflected on the north façade of the structure that faces Van Ness Street.
- All three elements of the building would be clad in a light beige limestone with a honed finish. Granite would be used on the base course, the three entrance drives, and the piers of the perimeter fence wall.
- Glazed areas, in both punched windows and in larger expanses, would be of clear and translucent glass in grey painted aluminum frames.

Landscaping

- All three building elements of the chancery are planned around gardens and exterior spaces to create an environment that balances the architecture and the landscape.
- At the main entrance on the south side of the building, a cobblestone-paved motor court with planters of flowering seasonal plants would frame the entrance to the building. The entrance hall would be further flanked by mature specimen pine trees.
- Upon entering the entrance pavilion, an ornamental garden would form the focus for the public spaces. This garden is intended to be a contemporary interpretation of the traditional Chinese garden with abstract rock placements and specimen flowering trees.
- The West Office Wing would be planned around a large garden that would include tall, mature specimen trees amidst wide areas of grass and other appropriate ground cover.

PREVIOUS COMMISSION ACTION

At its October 5, 2000 meeting, the Commission adopted amendments to the Development Controls for the Chancery Section of the International Center. The amendments provided for the combination of Lot Nos. 11, 12 and 13 into a single Lot #12. Additionally, the Commission required that the chancery that would be developed on Lot #12 consist of multiple buildings that will be in context with the overall character of the International Center, and that the majority of the height of the perimeter fence not be solid.

EVALUATION

NCPC staff have attended briefings on the progress of the development of the proposed Chancery. These briefings were a result of definitive progress on negotiations between the U.S. and Chinese governments regarding the concurrent development of U.S. and Chinese chanceries. Staff recommends approval of the proposal based on the following:

- The proposed Chancery is consistent with the Development Controls for the International Center.
- Although the Development Controls provide for a FAR of 1.9, the Chancery would be built at an FAR of 1.65, which is within the allowable FAR.
- There are no consular activities such as visas and passports proposed for the Chancery. As a result, there should be less vehicle and pedestrian traffic impacting the site and the nearby chanceries.
- The proposed redirection of the traffic pattern to a clockwise direction on International Place would enhance the entrance to the new Chancery. The Department of State advises that this action would not adversely affect the traffic patterns within the International Center nor disrupt services to the nearby federal office building and chanceries.
- Rather than building one monolithic structure, the proposed design of the building breaks up the masses to present an image of three structures connected by a central entrance pavilion. Additionally, these three sections of the building are effectively inserted into the steeply sloping site.
- The overall massing of the Chancery is such that it serves as a transition of scale between the chanceries within the center to the south and the University of the District of Columbia's buildings immediately north of Van Ness Street. On the south side, the Chancery would be 48 feet high (allowed to go to 60 feet) and compatible with the 48-foot height of nearby chanceries. On the north side along Van Ness Street, the Chancery would rise between 70 and 85 feet as a result of the sloping site. No portion of the building exceeds the height allowed in the Development Controls (392'-0" above mean sea level, D.C. Datum) except the flagpole. This is allowable under the Controls.

- As with other chanceries in the International Center, the Chancery would be a contemporary interpretation of its country's traditional architectural heritage. The sense of approach and entry, use of a variety of indoor and outdoor gardens, and the geometry of the structure are all based upon traditional Chinese architectural precepts.
- The principle building material of a buff-colored limestone should provide visual unity to the various sections of the building (West and East Offices and the Entrance Pavilion). The granite base course of the building should relate well to the proposed granite fence wall along Van Ness Street as well as to the driveway entrances, which will also be paved with granite.
- Although landscaping is very effective in its use in and around the proposed chancery, the Department of State and its consultants should ensure that sufficient plant material is incorporated along the north side of the building, particularly in front of the austere wall surfaces that face Van Ness Street to soften the visual impact on pedestrian traffic.
- As required in the previous Commission Action, the majority of the perimeter fence is not solid. The lower third will be of granite, and the remaining two thirds will be of an open metal fence design.
- The geometric articulation of the structure's overall mass should provide visual interest for such a large building. Given the lack of ornamentation and simple fenestration of the facades, the success of the final design would depend on the detailing of the joints and textural quality of the stone.
- The reconfigured parking area on the west side of the International Center's Central Park needs more study and design. It appears as though there is an abrupt and awkward relationship between the parking area and the pedestrian entrance to the Park. The Department of State and its consultants have advised that this area is still under design and is currently being refined.

CONFORMANCE

Comprehensive Plan

The proposal is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan. The Preservation and Historic Features Element of the Plan designates the International Center as a Special Place. This element states:

Special Streets and Places should be maintained and enhanced in a manner that promotes their roles as major features that help establish the image and the symbols of the National Capital in the minds of its residents and visitors.

The proposed Chancery is articulated in a manner that layers and breaks-up its overall mass and is compatible with adjacent chanceries and the immediate environs.

Master Plan/ Development Controls

The proposal is consistent with the Master Plan and Development Controls for the International Center governing chancery development at the site. The maximum height allowed under the Development Controls is 392'-0" above mean sea level, D.C. Datum, and the maximum Floor Area Ratio (FAR) allowed is 1.9.

COORDINATION

Coordinating Committee

The Coordinating Committee reviewed this item at its meeting on January 14, 2004 and forwarded the proposal to the Commission with the statement that the project has been coordinated with all agencies participating, except the District of Columbia Office of Planning. The representative for DCOP expressed concern about public access to the park, the impact of blasting to excavate for the chancery and the future use of the existing building. The Department of State has responded to those concerns. The participating agencies were NCPC; the Department of Housing and Community Development; the General Services Administration; and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority. Subsequent to the meeting, DCOP coordinated the proposal.

Commission on Fine Arts

The Commission on Fine Arts reviewed the proposal at its January 15, 2004 meeting. Overall, the Commission was very positive about the design of the proposed chancery. It was expressed that the next level of detailing of the building was critical to its overall success. The Commission did not take a formal vote. Instead, they are providing a follow-up letter to the Department of State.

National Environmental Policy Act

The Department of State has advised that when the International Center Master Plan was developed an environmental assessment was provided for the construction of chanceries on the entire site. Subsequently, when the three lots (#11, #12 and #13) were combined to result in a single Lot #12, the Department of State developed a programmatic-Environmental Assessment for the revised Development Controls in September 2000. The Department of State issued a Finding of No Significant Impact on the proposed action on September 22, 2000. The proposal is consistent with the policies and objectives of Section 101 of the National Environmental Policy Act.

Historic Preservation Act

The proposal is not subject to the provisions of Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended.