

# STAFF RECOMMENDATION

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NCPC File No. 5164



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**JOHN F. KENNEDY CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS  
RIVER TERRACE STAIRS TO THE ROCK CREEK AND POTOMAC PARKWAY TRAIL  
2700 F Street, NW  
Washington, D.C.**

Submitted by the District Department of Transportation

October 25, 2007

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## Abstract

The District Department of Transportation (DDOT) has submitted a concept design for a pair of grand stairs and elevators that will connect the Kennedy Center River Terrace to the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway trail. DDOT has collaborated with the Kennedy Center and the National Park Service in the development of the concept design.

The design includes a pair of glass and steel staircases and a pair of glass elevators extending from the terrace to ground level; a retaining wall along the river side of the Parkway that forms the eastern edge of the plaza; a paved plaza with benches, grass, ramps and stairs, and a bosque of cherry trees extending to the river's edge; and a railing at the river's edge. The stairs, elevators, and plaza would be illuminated at night. The design does not preclude the establishment of a boat dock in the future.

## Commission Action Requested by Applicant

Comments on the concept design pursuant to 40 U.S.C. § 8722(b)(1) and (d)

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## Executive Director's Recommendation

The Commission

**Comments favorably** on the concept design for the pedestrian connection between the Kennedy Center river terrace and the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway Trail, as shown on NCPC Map File No. 3.10(38.00)42394.

**Recommends** that, in the next phase of design development, DDOT fully consider the views of:

- The Kennedy Center that the stairs be perceived by their patrons as “inviting rather than a challenge.”
- The National Park Service that the vista of the Potomac River from the Parkway be preserved.

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## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### Site

The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, a presidential memorial, is situated on the east bank of the Potomac River south of Georgetown in Foggy Bottom, in Northwest Washington. The Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway passes under the River Terrace of the Kennedy Center. Recreational trails between the Parkway and the river’s edge are used by pedestrians and bicyclists.



The Kennedy Center’s river terrace provides a commanding view of the Potomac River, Roosevelt Island, the Georgetown waterfront, and the city’s skyline to the north.

### Background

The improvement of pedestrian connections between the Kennedy Center and its surroundings has been the subject of many plans. The construction of the New Hampshire Avenue stairs, the improved plaza on the east side of the building, and other physical and operational improvements have enhanced the public’s use of the Center in recent years.

The Commission has advocated the idea of a staircase connecting the terrace and the river bank-- in *Legacy*, and more recently, in June 2004, in its review of a concept plan of much greater scope by the Federal Highway Administration and the Kennedy Center to deck over the Potomac Freeway, construct buildings and a plaza on the east side of the Center, and create and improve its physical connection to its environs, including stairs designed by architect Rafael Vignoly.

The Commission also has approved site development plans from the National Park Service for the Georgetown Waterfront Park, which includes the enhancement of a segment of the trail (Phase 3) extending from Thompson's Boathouse to the Watergate area just north of the Kennedy Center. The Commission reviewed these concept plans for the bikeway and pedestrian promenade of the segment at its May 2005 meeting. The current submission includes the segment immediately to the south, parallel with the Kennedy Center's river terrace.

### Description

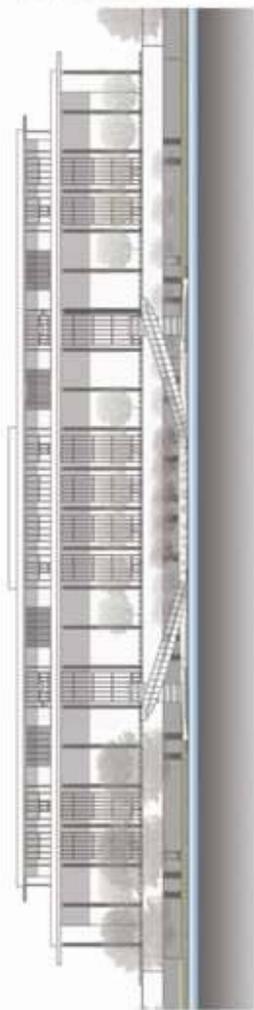
The concept design proposes the construction of a pair of grand flight of stair of glass and steel, structurally allied with a pair of glass elevator towers. The stairs' top platforms project from the terrace on axes from the Hall of Nations and Hall of States, marked by fountains. The stairs descend to the ground on the river side (west) of the Parkway, which runs beneath the river terrace. The treads are tempered, laminated non-slip glass; the risers are perforated steel; the railings are steel. The ascent or descent will be gradual, with 5 ½-inch risers and 15-inch treads. Every six feet of ascent or descent, a five-foot landing will provide viewing opportunities.

At the terrace level, the glass elevator towers also extend from the projecting landings created at the terrace edge. The towers are the sole support for the stairs. The upper platform and the stair truss cantilever from the tower. The stair truss beneath the treads is covered by metallic fabric. The difference in vertical height between the terrace and the trail is approximately 32 feet.

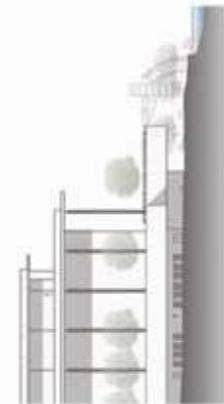
At the new ground level (scooped out of the 4'8"-high slope between the Parkway and the river trail), a landscaped plaza provides a place to rest or gather in the area between the parkway and the river edge. The plaza contains a continuous, curved retaining wall next to and parallel with the parkway. The height of the wall is 30 inches. An important design objective is providing a sheltering plaza that can disguise or limit the noise of Parkway traffic.

The granite-clad retaining wall may include water washing down its surface. Beyond are small areas of grass, benches, ramps, steps, a formal bosque of cherry trees and other landscaping such as marsh reeds, and a paved plaza (granite and concrete) that is contiguous with the trail. At the river edge, a railing allows for views of the river and surroundings. No part of the design would preclude future development of a dock for boats or water taxis.

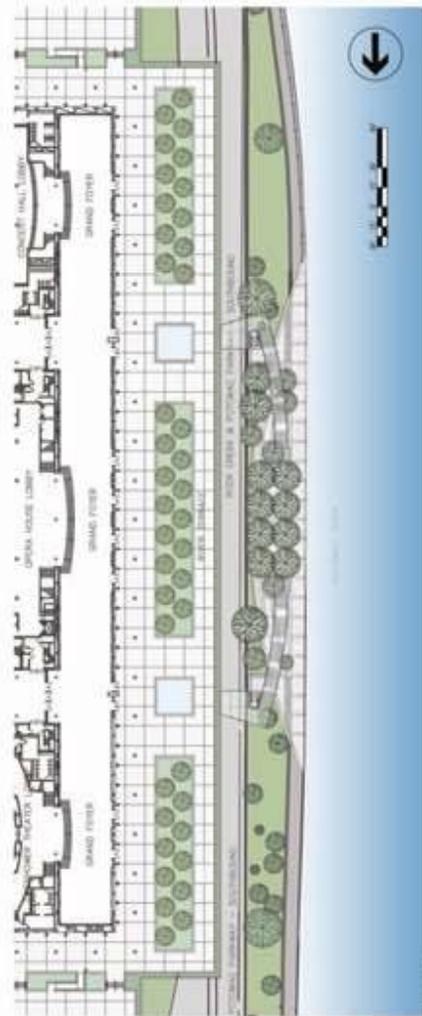
Central Pair of Stairs



Stairs River Terrace Elevation



Stairs North Plaza Elevation



Stairs Plan

5.0 Central Pair of Stairs

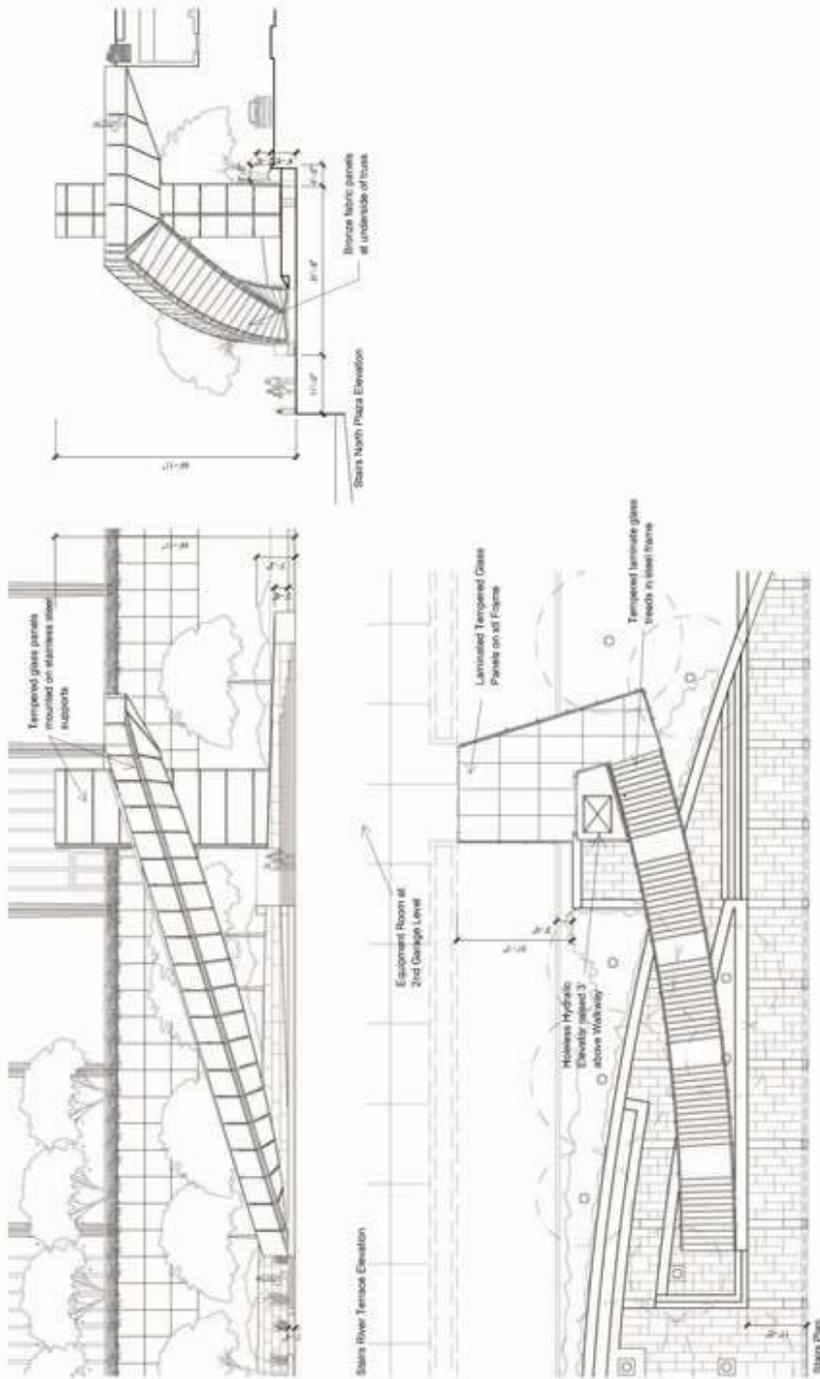
5.2 Stairs Plaza and Elevation

PEDESTRIAN ACCESS BETWEEN KENNEDY CENTER AND RCPP TRAIL  
Concept Study

KGP  
Design Studio

District Department of  
Transportation





5.0 Central Pair of Stairs  
5.4 Stairs Detail Plan and Elevations

PEDESTRIAN ACCESS BETWEEN KENNEDY CENTER AND RCPP TRAIL  
Concept Study

KGP  
Design Studio

District Department of  
Transportation





View of Plaza and water wall

Elevator and underside of Stair Cores



5.0 Central Pair of Stairs



Uplighting @ waterwall



Railing @ River Wall -Granite clad precast pylons with wood handrail and steel tie rods (reminiscent of C&O lock details)



## PROJECT ANALYSIS

Staff is pleased to recommend that the Commission comment favorably on the concept design for the Kennedy Center river terrace steps and the plaza and trail, which will provide the pedestrian access and connection between the waterfront and the Kennedy Center that have been long envisioned.

DDOT should continue to consult with the Kennedy Center, the National Park Service, the Commission staff and others about the stair and plaza materials as the design is developed further.

The effect that any of the plaza elements will have on views from the parkway should be carefully studied and the concern stated in the National Park Service's October 10, 2007 letter about the height of the retaining wall addressed. (The letter is attached to this report.)

DDOT should ensure that the stair design is welcoming, and that the platforms at the terrace level and the landings are inviting to patrons, as recommended in the Kennedy Center's September 28, 2007 letter. (The letter will be attached to this report.)

Staff finds that the design concept is in keeping with the contemporary, simple design character of the Kennedy Center and with the proposed enhancements already planned for the waterfront trail and promenade along the Potomac River.

## CONFORMANCE

### Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital

The staff has determined that policies in the *Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital: Federal Elements* apply, in particular the following policies in the Preservation and Historic Features Element:

Express the dignity befitting the image of the federal government in the national capital. Federal development should adhere to the high aesthetic standards already established by the planning and design legacy of the nation's capital.

Protect and enhance the vistas and views, both natural and designed, that are an integral part of the national capital's image.

(National Capital Image Policies, page 161.)

Protect the settings of historic properties, including views to and from the sites where significant, and integral parts of the historic character of the property.

(Stewardship of Historic Properties, page 164.)

The Transportation Element has policies for improved bicycle trails and connections, which include:

Support the development of a continuous system of trails for hikers and bikers in the region, with an emphasis on bicycle commuting.

(Bicycle Facilities, page 93)

The Parks and Open Space Element designates river and waterfront settings of the Nation's Capital. The Comprehensive Plan policies include:

Link open space along the waterfront to provide a continuous public open space system.

Complete the waterfront parks in Georgetown and Alexandria.

(Parks and Landscapes Policies; Waterfront Parks p. 111)

Maintain and conserve federal open space as a means of shaping and enhancing urban areas.

(Preservation and Maintenance Policies; p. 104)

### National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)

FHWA completed an Environmental Assessment (EA) in 2003 for the Kennedy Center Access Improvements. The cooperating agencies were the Kennedy Center, the National Park Service, the Commission, the Commission of Fine Arts, and the District Department of Transportation.

The EA included an alternative for stairs connecting the terrace with the trail; the current concept is a refinement of that alternative, S1 “Bowed Stairs.” The concept design has been improved by avoiding the disruption of the Potomac Bulkhead. The efficient structure of the stairs and elevator towers allows for minimal footprints at grade, keeping the impact on the ground and the effect on the vista as minimal as possible.

FHWA’s conclusion, arrived at by its Finding of No Significant Impact signed on December 9, 2003, was that the project did not require preparation of an environmental impact statement since no effects of the planned project were found to significantly impact the human or natural environment, and that mitigation of any minor impacts was feasible.

Review by NCPC staff determined that the proposed action would have significant, long-term beneficial effects on the urban design setting of the Kennedy Center, long-term improvements to transportation system access, and limited beneficial improvements to the local economy. The proposal is consistent with the plan objectives of the Commission’s *Extending the Legacy* and the Comprehensive Plan's general environmental goals.

For the concept design currently before the Commission for review, DDOT is the applicant and is proceeding with the 2003 finding by FHWA. DDOT has determined that the proposed concept design is a lower impact version of the S1 proposal, and that the concept design complies with and is consistent with the EA and its Finding.

### National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA)

The Kennedy Center, a presidential memorial, and the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway are listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The National Park Service will serve as lead federal agency for purposes of Section 106 review. Their determination is that the project will have no adverse effect on the qualities of the historic resources. The development of this design concept has included participation by the D.C. State Historic Preservation Office, as well as the staffs of the Commission and other agencies.

Staff finds that the concept design of the stairs and elevator towers is compatible with the architectural character and integrity of the Kennedy Center. The landscaping and plaza plan for the area between the parkway and the river edge is consistent with the development plans for the waterfront bicycle trail and promenade extending from the Georgetown waterfront, and will allow the public to enjoy views of Georgetown, the Potomac River, and Roosevelt Island.

As the plans are developed further, DDOT should ensure that the vistas of the river and shore northward from the site are not adversely affected by the plaza design or landscape plan.

## CONSULTATION

### Coordinating Committee

The Coordinating Committee re-coordinated this project at its October 10, 2007 meeting. The participating agencies were: NCPC, the General Services Administration, the District of Columbia Office of Planning, and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.

### Commission of Fine Arts

The Commission of Fine Arts reviewed and approved the current concept proposal at its October 18, 2007 meeting. Staff of the Commission of Fine Arts participated in the consultation meetings during which the current proposal was developed.