

# STAFF RECOMMENDATION

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NCPC File No. 6890

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## NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM TEMPORARY OBSERVATORY

Independence Avenue and Sixth Street, SW  
Washington, D.C.

Submitted by the Smithsonian Institution

November 25, 2008

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### Abstract

The Smithsonian Institution has submitted preliminary and final building plans for a temporary observatory at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. The observatory will house a Boller and Chivens 16 inch telescope on loan from Harvard University for two years. The Smithsonian secured the telescope as an educational exhibit for the 2009 International Year of Astronomy. The observatory will be open to the public for two to four hours daily, weather permitting, with the primary viewing target being the sun.

### Commission Action Requested by Applicant

Approval of approval of preliminary and final building plans pursuant to 40 U.S.C. § 8722(b)(1) and (d).

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### Executive Director's Recommendation

The Commission:

**Approves** the preliminary and final building plans for a temporary observatory at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. for a period not to exceed two years, as shown on NCPC Map File No. 1.71(38.00)42655

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**PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

Site

The observatory is to be sited in the southeastern portion of the National Air and Space Museum property. The National Air and Space Museum is located on Independence Avenue, SW between 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Streets, SW. The observatory is to be located on the existing southeast patio outside of the restaurant pavilion. Three locations on the museum’s property were examined and this location was chosen for the maximum view of the southern sky.

**Project Location**

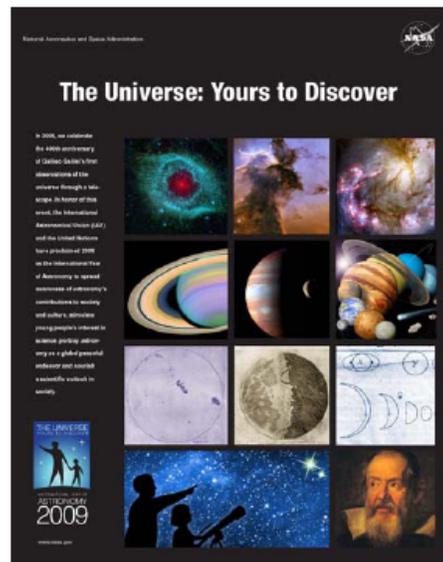


**Observatory Location**

**Example Graphic Panel**

Proposal

The Smithsonian Institution has submitted for preliminary and final approval a temporary observatory to be located at the National Air and Space Museum (NASM). NASM will participate in the “International Year of Astronomy,” which occurs in 2009. As part of that participation, the Smithsonian Institution has secured the loan of a Boller and Chivens 16-inch telescope from Harvard University for a period of two years. The telescope is approximately 12 feet tall and weighs 3,000 pounds and will be housed in a prefabricate fiberglass observatory dome structure. The observatory building is single-story and about 18 feet tall with a 22-foot diameter. The observatory will be assembled on site and will be set on a prepared pad independent of the existing terrace paver system. Located on the outside of the observatory will be a series of graphic panels that highlight current research and images taken from observatories around the world.





3.2 Observatory Elevation Detail, showing sample exhibit graphics

The existing museum staff parking is located below the exhibit area. Structural analysis had determined four structural columns located in the proposed area for the exhibit will allow for the installation of the exhibit without the need for structural improvements. Required electrical, data, and security feeds will be brought to the observatory through a small penetration in the existing terrace that will be reversed at the termination of the exhibit.

The telescope and observatory will be available for public access, depending on weather, for at least two to four hours of every day of the year that the museum is in operation, as well as for planned evening views, for a duration of two years. During the day, the sun shall be the main object to view, along with the moon and the brighter planets. The telescope and the observatory will be available on demand for educational groups.



The Smithsonian Institution anticipates visitorship of 50 to 100 people per hour for the observatory. SI proposes to use a configuration of temporary moveable stanchions and cords for crowd control. If demand increases, the Smithsonian Institution will implement a timed ticket operation, which has been conducted at the Air and Space Museum in the past for popular exhibits.

## Development Program

The installation of the telescope and observatory is scheduled to begin in February of 2009 with the exhibit ready for the start of the “100 Hours of Astronomy” event starting April 2, 2009. The construction budget for the observatory and site work is about \$200,000.

## PROJECT ANALYSIS

### Executive Summary

Staff recommends that the Commission **approve the preliminary and final building plans for a temporary observatory at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. for a period not to exceed two years.** The Smithsonian Institution has entered into a loan agreement with Harvard University to have the telescope for two years and does not expect to retain the telescope after the two year period; however, in the future if the Smithsonian Institution intends to extend the exhibition or make it permanent, they will be required to seek NCPC approval.

## CONFORMANCE

### Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital

The following polices within the Visitor Element of the Comprehensive Plan relate to this project:

Federal agencies should:

Continue to sponsor displays, special events, and arts, cultural, and recreational activities, in, on, and around federal facilities in the monumental core, in other areas of the District, and throughout the region; and

Encourage specialized information, learning aids, and tours at federal visitor attractions for groups such as school children or international visitors.

### National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)

The Smithsonian Institution is not considered a federal agency for purposes involving the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Consequently, NCPC is the lead agency for NEPA compliance when the Commission approves a proposal. This project can be categorically excluded as outlined in Section 8(c) of NCPC’s Environmental and Historic Preservation Policies and Procedures. The project meets the criteria noted by Categorical Exclusion 21, which is the review and approval of acquisition of occupiable space by lease acquisition, construction, or expansion, or improvement of an existing facility where all of the following conditions are met:

- a) The structure and proposed use are in compliance with local planning and zoning and any applicable District of Columbia, state, or federal requirements;
- b) The proposed use will not substantially increase the number of motor vehicles at the facility;

- c) The site and the scale of construction are consistent with those of those existing adjacent or nearby buildings; and
- d) There is no evidence of community controversy or other environmental issues.

#### National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA)

Pursuant to Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, the Smithsonian Institution submitted the project to the District of Columbia State Historic Preservation Officer (DC SHPO) for review. The Smithsonian Institution and the DC SHPO determined that the project will have no adverse effect to the National Mall, a property listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the National Air and Space Museum, a contributing element to the National Mall.

#### CONSULTATION

##### Coordinating Committee

The Coordinating Committee reviewed the proposal at its November 12, 2008 meeting and forwarded it to the Commission with the statement that the project has been coordinated with all agencies represented. The participating agencies were NCPC, the District of Columbia Office of Planning, the District Department of Transportation, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, the National Park Service and the General Services Administration.

##### Commission of Fine Arts

The National Air and Space Museum observatory was reviewed by the Commission of Fine Arts (CFA) as a Consent Calendar Item at its November 20, 2008 meeting. CFA found no objections to the design and installation of the observatory.