

# STAFF RECOMMENDATION

NCPC File No. 5438

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SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY  
KENNETH E. BEHRING CENTER  
Garage Infill for Museum Support Space  
and for the Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center

Constitution Avenue between 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Streets, NW,  
Washington, D.C.

Submitted by the Smithsonian Institution

April 30, 2009

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## Abstract

The Smithsonian Institution has submitted a design proposal to infill the existing garage space at the National Museum of American History to create space for museum support functions and the Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center. The garage is located underground on the southern side of the building adjacent to Madison Drive, NW and beneath the entry terrace facing the National Mall. It will include two glass entry pavilions at the east and west ends of the garage. The project will fulfill long-term goals of returning floor space on public museum floors to visitor experiences and needs.

## Commission Action Requested by Applicant

Approval of preliminary and final site and 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 site and building plans for the garage infill project to create space for museum support functions and the Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center at the National Museum of American History, as shown on NCPC Map File No. 1.24(38.00)42750.

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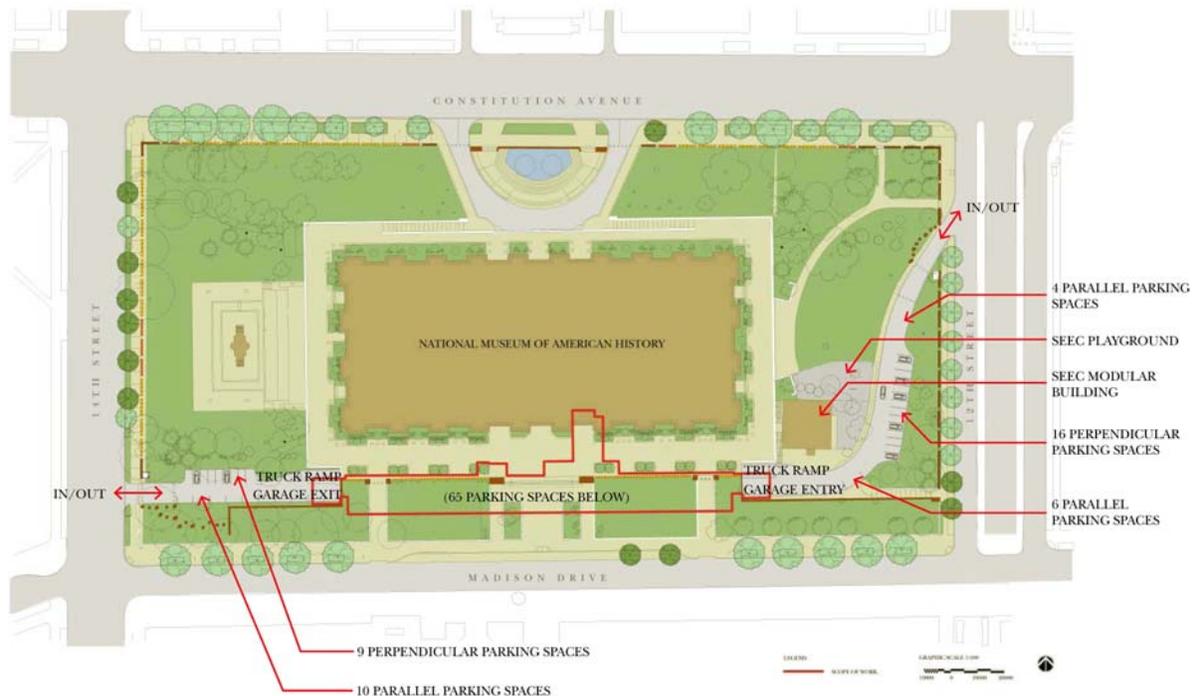
PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Site

The National Museum of American History is located on the National Mall on Constitution Avenue between 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Streets, NW. In addition to the museum building itself, the site includes an underground parking garage, 19 surface parking spaces to the west of the building, 26 surface parking spaces to the east of the building, and the Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center housed in a modular building in the east courtyard.



Aerial Photo of the Site



Existing Site Plan

## Background

The National Museum of American History, Kenneth E. Behring Center (NMAH) is one of the Smithsonian's most visited museums, and home of over three million objects. Designed by Walker Cain of McKim, Mead & White, the Museum is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places due to its location in the National Mall Historic District and may be eligible individually for exceptional significance. The museum contains a variety of spaces, both public and non-public. Floors one, two, three, and part of the lower level are publicly accessible and used for exhibits, education, public gatherings, retail shopping, food services, offices, and collections storage. Except for food services and the museum shop, the lower level and the fourth and fifth floors are used primarily for offices, collections storage and building support functions.

Currently several museum departments are scattered around the NMAH from the Lower Level to the Fourth Floor, often impacting adjacent exhibit spaces. This mix of visitor and back-of-house spaces contributes to visitors' visual disorientation and functional inefficiency. Many departments have related units not only on different levels but also on different sides of the museum. Relocating these departments affords NMAH the opportunity to continue museum operations efficiently while also fulfilling long-term goals of returning floor space on public museum floors to visitor experiences and needs.

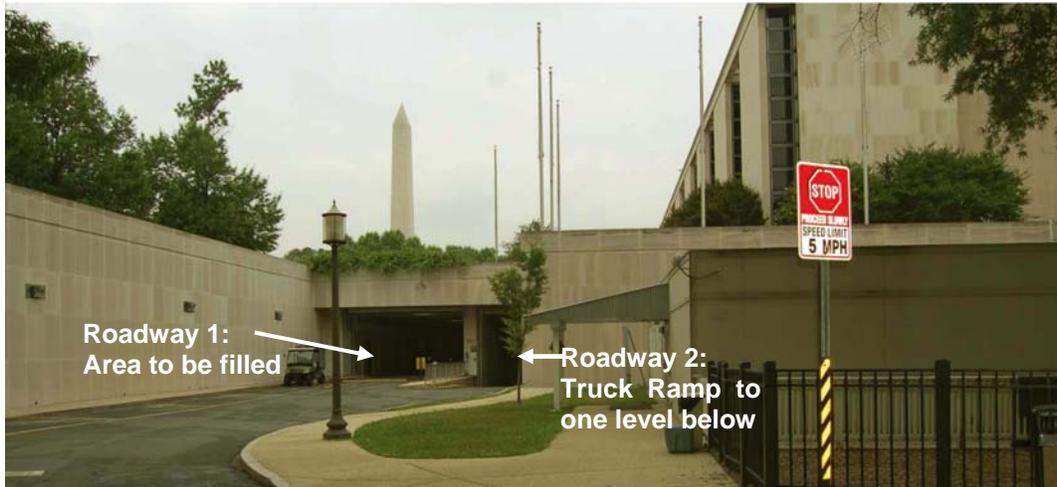
## Proposal

The Smithsonian Institution has submitted a proposal to infill the existing garage under the museum's terrace and adjacent to the Mall. The proposal also includes building glass vestibules on the east and west driveway entries to bring daylight into the space. The proposed project follows the recommendations from the NMAH Comprehensive Facilities Development Plan (Master Plan) prepared in February of 2006. The goals of the master plan are:

- To improve the architectural and aesthetic setting for exhibits;
- To improve visitor's substantive orientation;
- To assure appropriate balance in exhibit themes and content;
- To increase the museum's reach; and
- To enhance the prospect of effective implementation.

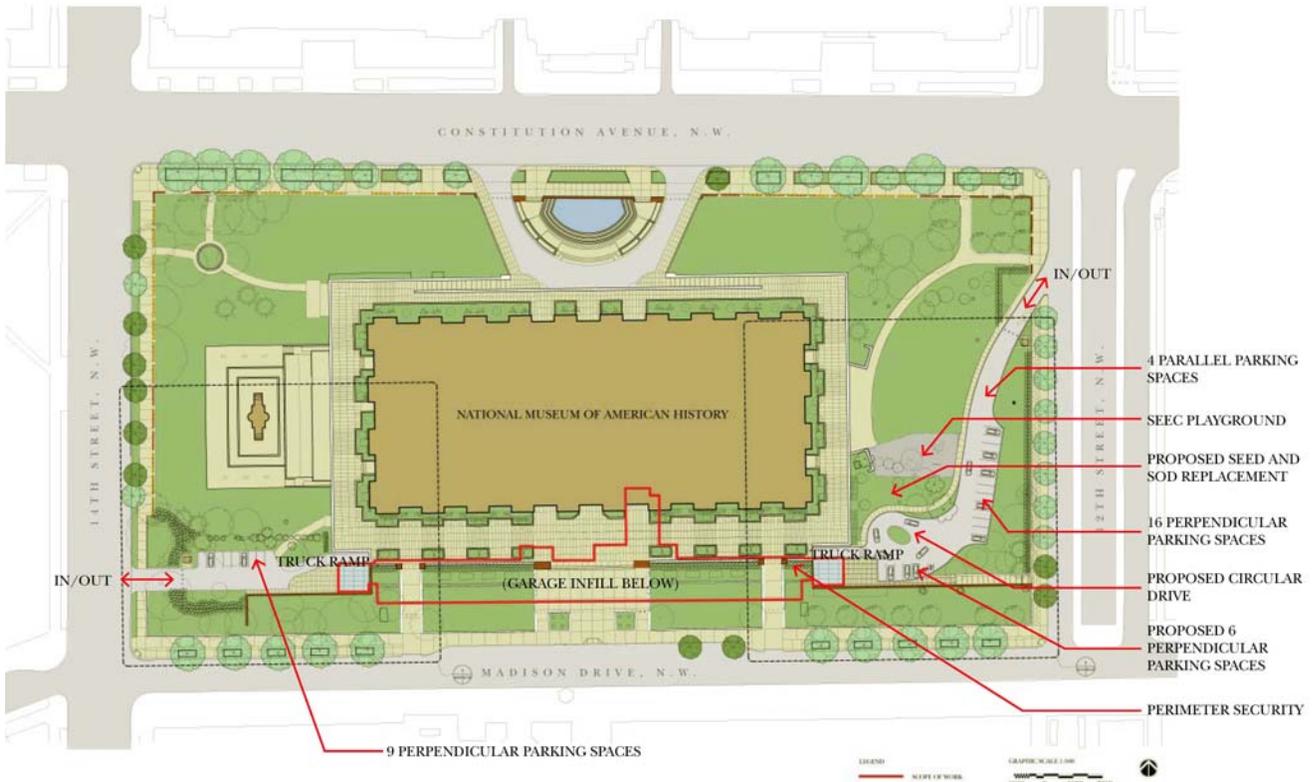
The proposed infill site occupies approximately 30,000 square feet of programmatic space, of which approximately 24,500 square feet is within a currently underground, non-visible parking garage area. The garage, located along the southern edge of NMAH at Floor One (parallel to Madison Drive, NW and beneath the entry terrace facing the National Mall) will be converted into a "suite" of spaces that sit in the "back" of public Floor One.

The existing garage currently houses 65 parking spaces and accommodates two roadways: Roadway 1 runs from east to west through the garage; Roadway 2, just to the north, runs from east to west, down to the Lower Level loading dock. Roadway 2 will remain unaffected in the proposed project.



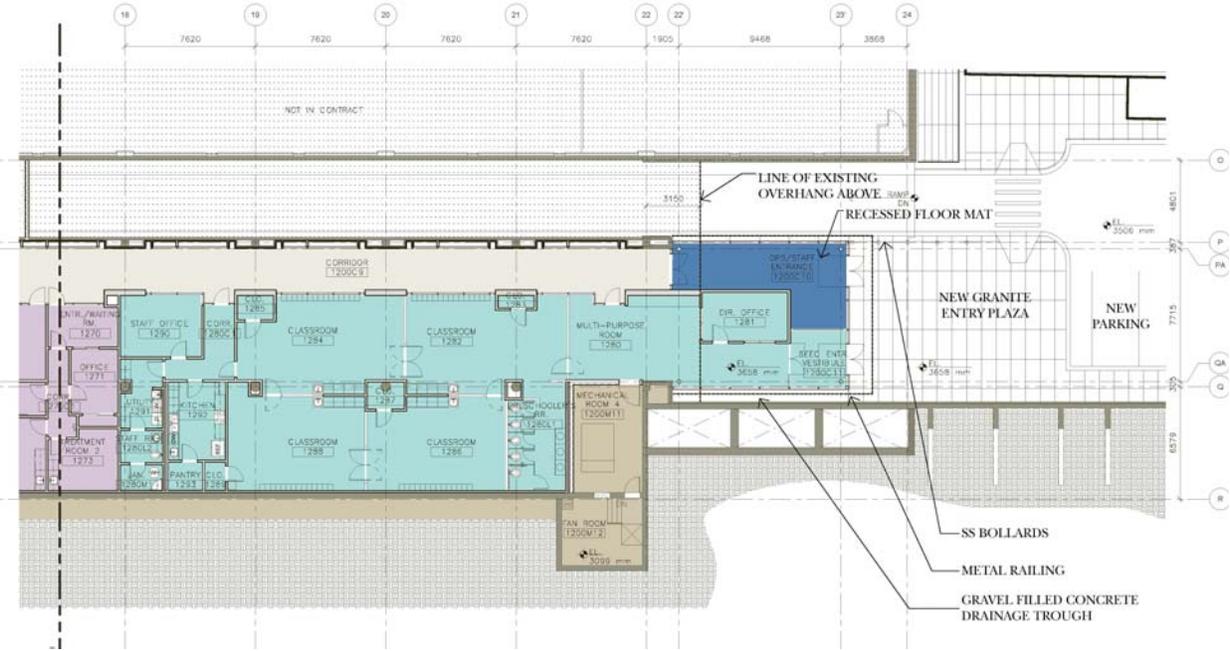
Roadway 1 is seen to the left of the image and Roadway 2 (the truck ramp) is seen to the right.

Overall dimensions of the garage area to be infilled are approximately 49 feet wide by 500 feet long. The resulting net area reclaimed from the garage is approximately 24,500 square feet of the 30,000 square foot program requirement. The adjacent first floor space adds approximately 3,860 square feet. Overall dimensions of the east and west side glass pavilions are approximately 28 feet-6 inches wide by 34 feet long. The resulting gain is approximately 1,940 square feet of the program requirement.



Site Plan – Changes to the east yard include removing the SEEC modular building, adding a playground, and reconfiguring the existing driveway approach (from 12th Street, NW). Changes to the west yard include removing 10 surface parking spaces.





**Proposed First Floor Plan – Zone C (Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center)**

The primary design challenges for an underground addition/renovation, with an exceptionally long, narrow configuration, include spatial quality and light. To mitigate the narrow configuration, the proposed design jogs the long east-west oriented circulation and egress corridor and creates nodes at the intersections with the Museum’s north-south-oriented east and west corridors. In addition, glass entry pavilions are located at the far east and west ends of the space to accommodate required program uses, and to use light to create a strong visual impression at the two entrances.



**Rendering of the pavilion on the east side of the museum**

The lightness of these pavilions is extended deeper into the infill space through the use of luminous ceilings, glass walls, glass clerestory windows, glass sidelights, illuminated display cases along the corridor, and open office landscape areas. A neutral material palette, including terrazzo, porcelain tile, and light woods, finishes the space. The pavilions are located within the existing walls of the Museum and are lightly ‘touching’ the existing garage entry at the existing

entrance overhang elements, or 'headers'. The pavilions are detached, and freestanding, from the south Museum wall, touching only the garage entrance 'header'. The east pavilion vestibule will contain an SI Office of Protective Services (OPS) security station with a manned staff (24/7 security) and SEEC entrance. The west 'pavilion' vestibule will contain a separate, non-manned staff entrance (with card reader and camera). Both east and west entrances/exits will serve as emergency egress routes from the Museum's first floor.



**Rendering of the pavilion on the west side of the museum**

In addition to the garage infill described above, there are also changes to the East Yard configuration. The SEEC modular building will be removed. The existing driveway approach (from 12th Street, NW) will be reconfigured to accommodate a circular drive for convenient daycare center drop-off, while maintaining roadway clearance for access to the lower level loading docks. With the removal of the modular building, the existing playground will eventually be reconfigured. Preliminary concepts included in this assessment show an oval-shaped playground area nestled alongside the newly reconfigured drop-off driveway. Twenty-six existing parking spaces along the current east access driveway will be retained. Nine existing parking spaces will be retained along the west access driveway, and ten will be lost due to the reconfiguration around the west 'pavilion' vestibule.

## PROJECT ANALYSIS

### Executive Summary

Staff commends the applicant for creatively adding usable space within the existing site without visually impacting the National Mall. The glass pavilions are not visible from the Mall or the museum's entry terrace. The placement of the pavilions at the east and west ends of the building is a positive response to the symmetry of the existing museum. The SEEC will be located on the east end to afford easy access to the outside, convenient parent drop-off/pick-up, and an immediate adjacency to the children's playground. The project will allow museum operations to continue efficiently while also fulfilling long-term goals of returning floor space on public museum floors to visitor experiences and needs.

Staff also commends the applicant for successfully addressing the challenges of bringing light to an exceptionally long, narrow configuration through the use of glass pavilions, luminous ceilings, glass walls, glass clerestory windows, glass sidelights, illuminated display cases along the interior corridor, and open office landscape areas. Skylights were initially considered; however, they would have been located outside the line of perimeter security on the entry terrace above.

The applicant has also addressed initial concerns about noise and air quality. While the truck loading zone is adjacent to the new office space and the SEEC, it is one floor down and truck deliveries are only a couple times per day on average. The trash is picked-up three times per week and food deliveries occur one to two times per day. Deliveries of museum collections vary depending on exhibit openings.

The wall between the garage and the truck ramp is an 8” concrete block. A two-inch semi-rigid insulation will be added to the wall and enclosed with gyp board to contribute to the acoustic separation. Two exhaust fans located in fan rooms in the southeast and southwest corners of the garage draw outside air through the east and west openings of the truck ramp, up and down through intake air vents located in the wall, through a series of concrete plenums located below the garage floor, and exhaust through grates located on the lawn.

Finally the proposed project results in a permanent loss of 75 surface parking spaces that will not be returned because of the museum’s proximity to several public transportation alternatives.

## CONFORMANCE

### Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital

The proposal is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital Federal Elements with particular relevance to the following elements:

- *The Preservation and Historic Features*
  - National Capital Image
  - The Historic Plan of Washington, D.C
  
- *Visitors*
  - Federal Visitor Attractions

### National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA)

NCPC has approval authority and independent responsibility under the National Environmental Policy Act and the National Historic Preservation Act for Federal projects in the District of Columbia. In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) and in cooperation with NCPC, the Smithsonian Institution prepared an Environmental Assessment for the project in March 2009. Based on the Environmental Assessment, NCPC has issued a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the project.

### National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA)

The District of Columbia State Historic Preservation Office has reviewed the project in accordance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and has determined that the project would have “no adverse effect” upon the National Museum of American History. NCPC staff concurs. The Museum is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places due to its location in the National Mall Historic District and may be eligible individually for exceptional significance.

### CONSULTATION

#### Coordinating Committee

The Coordinating Committee reviewed the proposal on April 15, 2009, and forwarded it to the Commission with the statement that the project has been coordinated with all participating agencies. The participating agencies were NCPC; the National Park Service; the General Services Administration; the District of Columbia Office of Planning; the District Department of Transportation and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.

#### Commission of Fine Arts

The Commission of Fine Arts approved the design with no objections on their consent calendar at its April 6, 2009 Commission meeting.