

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

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NCPC File No. 6117



COLUMBUS CIRCLE AND COLUMBUS PLAZA IMPROVEMENTS

Massachusetts Avenue and 1st Street, NE
Washington, DC

Submitted by the District Department of Transportation, Union Station Redevelopment Corporation, and the National Park Service

April 30, 2009

Abstract

The proposed improvements to Columbus Plaza and Columbus Circle, south of Union Station, is a multi-agency effort that has been in development for some years to improve conditions for both pedestrians and vehicles at the station as well as rehabilitate the appearance of Columbus Circle and Plaza. The project proposes improvements to access and circulation patterns in and around Columbus Plaza for pedestrians, taxis, bicyclists, private vehicles, commercial vehicles, Metrobuses, private motor coaches, and the many tour buses with permanent stops at Union Station. In addition, the access road will be removed from the interior of the plaza and the historic setting of the Columbus Memorial Fountain will be enhanced by extending the plaza with a complementary landscape in the newly created open space.

Commission Action Requested by Applicant

Approval of preliminary and final site development plans, pursuant to 40 U.S.C. sec 8722(b)(1) and (d).

Executive Director's Recommendation

The Commission:

Approves the preliminary and final site development plans for improvements to Columbus Circle and Columbus Plaza, as shown on NCPC Map File No. 1.11(41.00)42368.

Notes that the Executive Director had made a Finding of No Significant Impact for the Improvements to Columbus Circle and Columbus Plaza, provided that DDOT, in mitigation, submit a plan for temporary construction vibration monitoring and protection for the Columbus Memorial Fountain as part of its permitting activity on National Park Service property.

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Site

The Columbus Memorial Fountain is the centerpiece of Columbus Circle and Plaza, to the south of Union Station. The setting of the station--the realigned curve of Massachusetts Avenue, the creation of Louisiana Avenue, and the relationship of the station and its landscape setting to the U.S. Capitol and Grounds--are the achievement of the McMillan Commission and subsequent implementation. With the increase in the number and types of vehicles using Union Station and the Circle in the last century and with the number of pedestrians crossing the site to use the Metrorail station, alterations to the plaza have increased the number of traffic lanes and reduced the pedestrian open space and the integrity of the historic setting. The current proposal addresses this imbalance by correcting the existing safety concerns and alleviating the traffic congestion in and around Columbus Plaza and Columbus Circle. It also rehabilitates the setting of the fountain and restores its prominence and accessibility.



Background

The Commission reviewed and approved a concept design for the realignment of Columbus Circle and Plaza proposed by the Union Station Redevelopment Corporation in (year xxx—about 2002). The current proposal differs from and is an improvement on that earlier proposal because it addresses more up-to-date pedestrian and vehicle needs as well as comprehensive design improvements to the setting of the historic Columbus Memorial Fountain that were not previously considered.

The Commission approved the construction of the Bicycle Transit Center (BTC) at the southern terminus of the Metropolitan Branch Trail immediately west of Union Station in May 2007. The Commission approved preliminary and final site development plans for perimeter security at Union Station at its October 2008 meeting. The construction phases of the security project and the Plaza project will be linked and coordinated.

Proposal

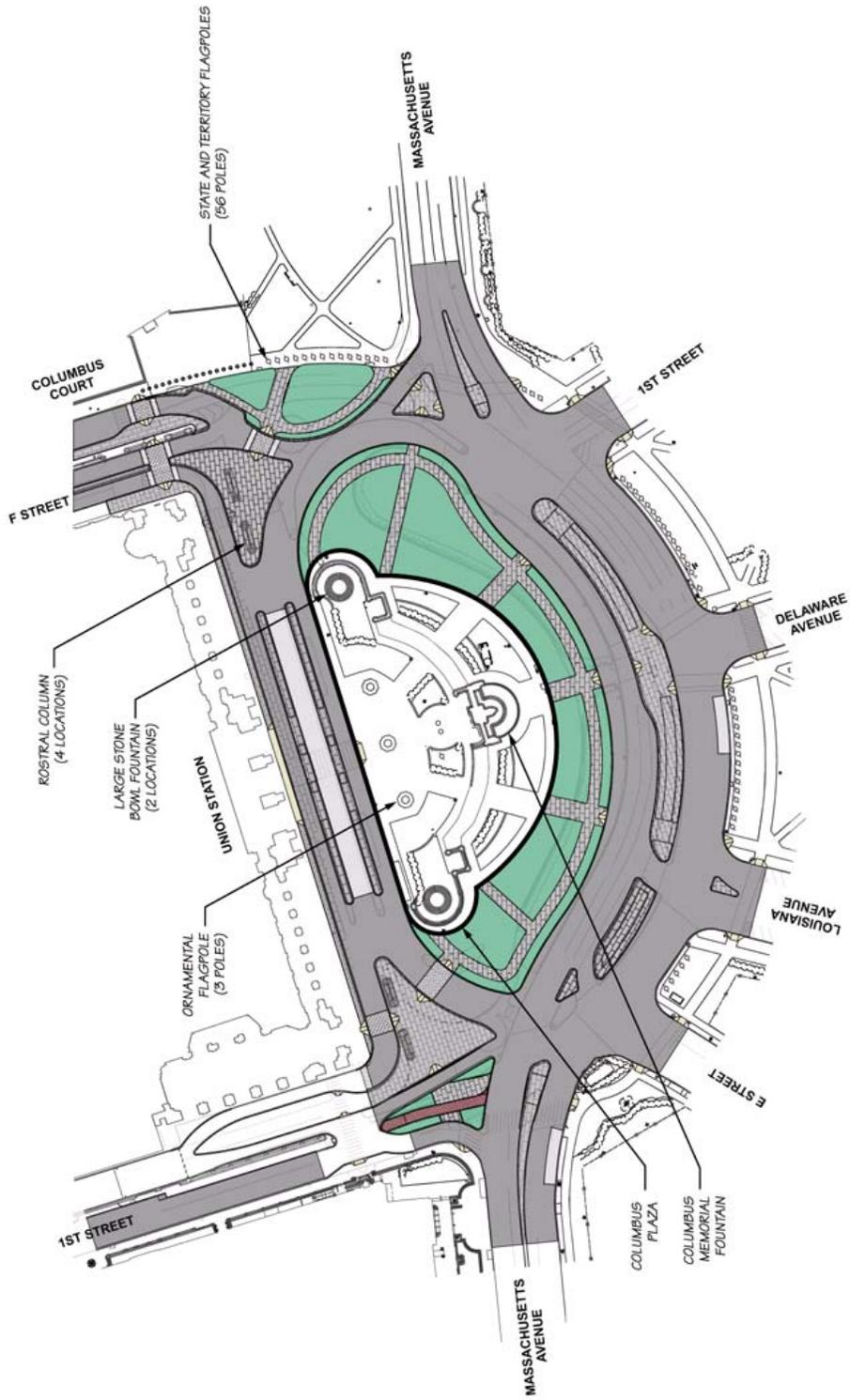
The proposal consists of improvements to the roadways, sidewalks, landscaping, streetlights, and traffic lights in and around Columbus Circle and Columbus Circle. Primary improvements include:

- Widening Massachusetts Avenue along the southern edge of Columbus Plaza;
- Expanding traffic islands/pedestrian refuges in Massachusetts Avenue and add landscaping that will not affect the views to the state flagpoles from the plaza;
- Eliminating the interior semi-circular access road and parking in front of the Columbus Memorial Fountain;
- Reconfiguring access to Columbus Circle on the east and west ends of Union Station;
- Creating safer pedestrian crossings and constructing wheelchair/bicycle ramps with depressed curbs at all pedestrian crosswalks in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA);
- Creating connections from the Metropolitan Branch Bike/Pedestrian trail to the new Bicycle Transit Station west of Union Station and providing access across Massachusetts Avenue to the National Mall;
- Recapturing the open space adjacent to the plaza and redesigning Columbus Plaza by extending the walkways, installing grass sod between the walkways (in the location of the existing interior access road, which will be removed) and maintaining the historic radial pattern;
- Restoring or repairing brick walkways and granite curbing with in-kind materials in Columbus Plaza and re-establishing the historic granite curb that delineates the perimeter of the plaza;
- Removing the existing metal fence and shrub hedge along the southern perimeter of Columbus Plaza;

- Installing additional pedestrian lighting to the interior of Columbus Plaza particularly along the new walkways built in the area of the interior access road (which will be removed);
- Improving lighting to illuminate Columbus Memorial Fountain and the three American flags in front of Union Station and modifying streetlight systems;
- Modifying five traffic signals and providing new traffic signals at two intersections.

The photograph below, looking southwest, shows the existing conditions, including the interior access road within the plaza that will be removed and replaced with grass lawn and pedestrian sidewalks, as indicated in the proposed site development plan on the following page. New or lengthened or repositioned traffic islands have been designed to improve pedestrian safety.





PROJECT ANALYSIS

Executive Summary

The staff recommends approval of preliminary and final site development plans to reconfigure the road system through and around Columbus Plaza/Columbus Circle and to rehabilitate the historic plaza. The project will improve pedestrian safety, separate vehicle and pedestrians at critical bottlenecks, create new intersections to improve vehicular flow, re-design lane widths and traffic signalization patterns, and rehabilitate and enhance the historic characteristics and extant historic fabric of Columbus Plaza.

The improvements include radial pedestrian walkways that will be extended to Massachusetts Avenue, giving further emphasis to the geometry of the site. A pedestrian and bicycle circulation system has been revised in response to the Bicycle Transit Center on the west side of Union Station. On the east side of the plaza, where existing traffic has been causing serious and even tragic conflicts with pedestrians, the proposed road curvature has been adjusted and a raised crosswalk will be constructed. The proposed traffic islands in Massachusetts Avenue have been widened to provide a pedestrian refuge if necessary and improve pedestrian safety. Massachusetts Avenue will be widened slightly with the insertion of the islands. Longer lengths of curbs have been lowered at the sidewalk and islands in front of Union Station for improved convenience of pedestrians with wheeled luggage. Designated bike lanes have been added along Massachusetts Avenue, connecting to the Metropolitan Branch Trail with its southern terminus at Union Station.

Landscaping improvements have been guided by the National Park Service. The historic elements of the plaza will remain. The most significant improvement is the removal of the interior access road, which will allow for the creation of a unified landscape and the removal of vehicles from the enlarged pedestrian open space. The original brick herringbone pattern in the plaza will be retained and the brick paving pattern will be extended into the enlarged pedestrian plaza in a complementary color to distinguish the historic and new materials. 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 perimeter security bollards (previously approved by the Commission). The new paving and scoring will match the existing concrete sidewalk. Additional trees and landscaped areas will be established along the plaza, exterior circle, and adjacent to Massachusetts Avenue. The flagpoles with the state flags will remain in place.

CONFORMANCE

Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital

The following are applicable policies from the *Preservation and Historic Features Element* of the Comprehensive Plan:

National Capital Image

1. Express the dignity befitting the image of the federal government in the national capital.
5. Protect and enhance the vistas and views, both natural and designed, that are an integral part of the national capital's image.

Stewardship of Historic Properties

5. Identify and protect both the significant historic design integrity and the use of historic landscapes and open spaces.

The Historic Plan of Washington, DC

2. Promote continuity in the historic design framework of the nation's capital by protecting and enhancing the elements, views, and principles of the L'Enfant Plan.
5. Protect the reservations that contain historic landscapes and features from incompatible changes or incursions.

National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan

The Commission approved the related perimeter security site development plans for Union Station at its October 2008 meeting, finding the project consistent with the policies and design goals of the Urban Design and Security Plan.

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)

The Executive Director adopted the Environmental Assessment prepared by the National Park Service in cooperation with the Union Station Redevelopment Corporation, the District of Columbia Department of Transportation, and NCPC, and with the contributions of other agencies that have assisted in decision-making by evaluating the potential impacts on the environment of the proposed site improvements. This 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).

As mitigation, DDOT will submit a plan for temporary construction vibration monitoring and protection of the Columbus Memorial Fountain as part of permitting activity on NPS property.

NPS concurred with DDOT's 4(f) action on behalf of the Federal Highway Administration. Small amounts of acreage will be transferred as a result of the realignment of roadways and adjacent land. The proposed land transfers have been analyzed in the EA and will be submitted at a future date for review by the Commission.

Eight comments were received during the comment periods (in 2008 and 2009) on the Environmental Assessment, some from individuals commenting on the landscape and planting beds and pedestrian accommodation at raised crosswalks and signalized pedestrian crossings.

Two additional projects are scheduled for construction at Union Station: the Bicycle Transit Center located near the west portico of Union Station between 1st Street, NE, and Union Station, and the installation of perimeter security bollards in front of Union Station. These two projects identified no environmental impacts. No significant impacts will result from the cumulative effects of the Proposed Action and the other actions.

National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA)

The District of Columbia State Historic Preservation Officer (DC SHPO) has concurred with NPS's determination of No Adverse Effect.

The DC SHPO has been consulted since the inception of the project and was instrumental, along with the National Park Service and the Commission of Fine Arts, in discussions leading to the rehabilitation of the plaza and circle to improve the historic setting for the Columbus Memorial Fountain and Union Station. Commission staff participated in consultation, as well, particularly in the redesign of the shape of the plaza and the north edge of the Massachusetts Avenue traffic lanes (as shown in the proposal) to complement more directly the Beaux Arts-style setting.

CONSULTATION

Coordinating Committee

The Coordinating Committee reviewed the preliminary and final site development plans for the improvements to Columbus Circle and Columbus Plaza at its September 12, 2007 meeting. All agencies present coordinated the project.

Commission of Fine Arts

The Commission of Fine Arts approved final plans for the reconfiguration of the plaza at its April 16, 2009 meeting. (Absent a quorum, the Commission will place the recommendation on its May 21, 2009 agenda for confirmation.) The Commission focused its attention closely on the redesign of the open space and proposed new materials of this significant element of the McMillan Plan.

Referral to relevant local planning agencies

Many federal and District of Columbia agencies have been involved in planning and consultation. The D.C. Office of Planning wrote to the applicants to expressing interest in the project's LID (low impact development) practices. In addition, the Architect of the Capitol was consulted. A public information meeting was held on January 8, 2009 at Union Station. The attendance sheet was signed by 14 people.