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# Enhance Center City Parks

## Big Idea in Action



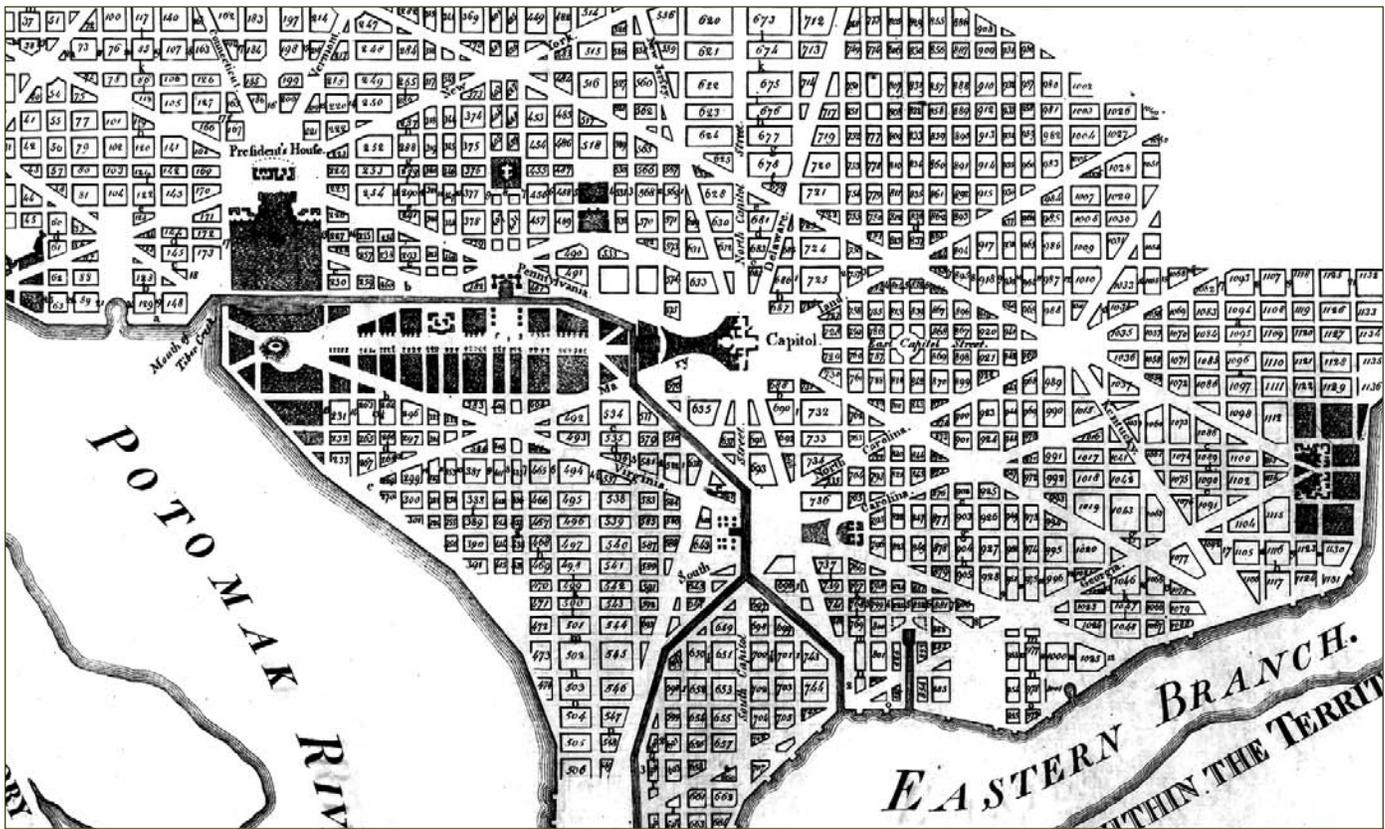
In the future, residents and workers embrace Center City parks and open space near their homes and offices as places to have a cup of coffee with friends, read a book, play with their kids, surf the Web, buy fresh bread at a farmers market, or just relax to take in the fresh air and sunshine. Visitors delight in learning about our collective American experience through cultural markers and commemorative works as they explore the historic squares and energetic urban avenues in the Center City. Others come together in these spaces to listen to a free concert or rally for a national cause.

To achieve this future, the District and federal governments, along with the growing business and neighborhood communities, join forces to meet the expanding demands for recreational opportunities in the Center City and improve the condition of its existing parks and open space.

The L'Enfant Plan's squares, circles, and triangles are restored and enhanced, filled with well-maintained trees, grass, flowers, monuments, and fountains, as well as activities that provide exciting urban experiences. In addition, sidewalks and streets surrounding parks, as well as street corridors that connect the parks will be filled with trees, lighting, benches, and outdoor cafes. Events and other recreational activities in these spaces will contribute to vibrant outdoor activities in the Center City. The parks' uniqueness and national significance are recognized as prime assets to the Center City's quality of life.

Some Center City parks will build upon the tradition of Dupont Circle, and become a community hub and provide a strong sense of neighborhood identity. In places where minimal park space has existed, new approaches for recreation will use street rights-of-ways, public properties, existing yards, or other public assets.

Dupont Circle has become the central gathering space of its namesake neighborhood and contributes to its economic vitality.



Washington's circles and squares were designed by L'Enfant to provide visual and physical reference points in the urban landscape and serve as centers of the proposed neighborhoods he hoped would develop throughout the planned city. It was not until after the Civil War, however, that grassy parks were located within most of these open spaces.

## Brief History of Center City Parks

While the L'Enfant Plan had grand intentions for Washington's parks and open spaces, due to fiscal challenges it took decades before many of them were more than dirt passageways. Apart from the National Mall, President's Park (including what is now Lafayette Square), and the United States Capitol Grounds, Washington Circle and Franklin Park (previously known as Fountain Square) were the only park spaces maintained consistently by the federal government in the early 19th century. Significant completion of the L'Enfant Plan did not occur until after the Civil War, when Washington experienced large population growth.

During the late nineteenth century, several important center city parks within the open spaces identified in the L'Enfant Plan were constructed. These include McPherson, Farragut, and Mount Vernon Squares, as well as Scott, Thomas, and Dupont Circles. These were often designed as formal gardens surrounded by carriageways, and provided more passive recreation opportunities for the homes and residential buildings encircling the spaces. Similar park improvements were made in the small triangle parks along the major avenues. Congressional reports on parks reflected the popular belief that their development could lead to societal reform, contribute to the health and well-being of residents, and provide much-needed employment in the war-ravaged capital.

Growth of the city continued into the twentieth century, and the neighborhood context surrounding many Center City parks changed from residential to commercial. As commerce grew within the Center City, many of the parks were reconfigured to accommodate greater traffic and new traffic patterns, and some of the smallest parks were removed or paved over as concrete traffic islands. In addition, the design of the parks themselves evolved over time to reflect current aesthetic ideals, accommodate new memorials, improve security, or ease



Library of Congress

Thomas Circle circa 1922

maintenance in response to limited budgets. Franklin Park, for example, was redesigned several times and went from a curvilinear, naturalistic design aesthetic in 1888 to a more symmetrical park design of the 1930s, which is relatively retained to this day. During this time, center city parks were maintained by the District's Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, and improvements of the parks reinforced their importance as neighborhood amenities.

By the second half of the 20th century, new parks were created within many of the Center City's urban renewal areas. Sometimes these projects were characterized by large-scale redevelopment with significant park and open space resources accessible to the public; other times, projects involved open space and recreational amenities available only to residents. Some original open spaces identified in the L'Enfant Plan were significantly altered or disappeared altogether during this period. It was also during this time that new designs in commercial buildings and federal office spaces began to provide publicly accessible plazas and courtyards as open space amenities.

Interest in restoring or reclaiming the Center City's historic squares, streets, and original rights-of-ways that have been disrupted or closed is increasing during the early 21st century. Protecting the visual openness and functional qualities of the L'Enfant Plan is a high priority. In addition, there is a strong commitment to reinforce the Center City's, and Washington's, relationship to the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers through new development. These include improved waterfront access and new parks and active open space along the waterfront. As the cost of land in Center City continues to rise because of residential and commercial demand, there is a new push to use public properties and the air-rights above depressed highways and rail lines for new office, residential, hotel, and cultural development, and to reclaim land for parks and multi-purpose open spaces.



Lafayette Park

## Challenges



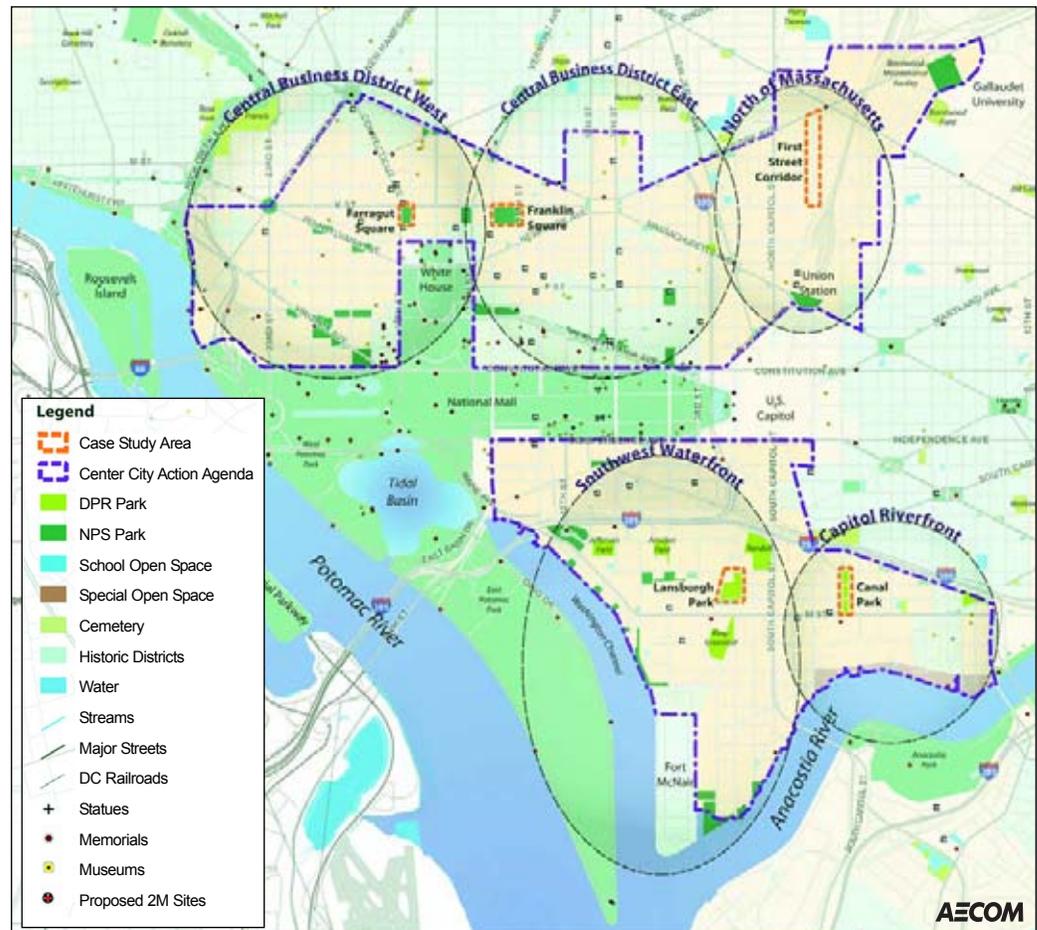
Issues related to homelessness are challenges that are not park specific and require a coordinated management approach among the District, federal agencies, and other partners.

The majority of Center City parks are relatively small. The deficiency of medium and large sized parks puts pressure on the National Mall, East and West Potomac Parks, school properties, and areas outside Center City to provide fields and other active recreational facilities. Additional challenges for Center City’s urban parks include:

- ◆ A lack of diversity in the type of parks needed to serve emerging residential areas.
- ◆ Insufficient resources to enhance and maintain the parks appropriately.
- ◆ A high cost of land that makes it difficult to add new parks.
- ◆ No cohesive approach to park design, security (including issues such as homelessness and drug dealing), partnerships, and programming.
- ◆ Lack of flexibility in existing federal and District laws, regulations, and policies in programming to keep parks more active and secure.

Central Business Districts East and West are relatively built-out areas of the Center City. Open space is primarily found within the historic circles, squares, and triangles of this area, as well as the wide avenues that connect many of these places. Given that most of these spaces contain commemorative features and historic landscapes, improvements to their physical character and how they are used in terms of events and concessions must consider how the historical and cultural resources will be impacted.

The Center City, as defined for CapitalSpace, is the dense urban area surrounding the National Mall and U.S. Capitol. Neighborhoods within the Center City have their own distinct character, issues, and opportunities related to parks and open space. Case study analyses were completed for Farragut and Franklin Squares, Washington Canal Park, and the NoMa First Street, NE corridor to better understand issues and opportunities within these subregions.



The Southwest Waterfront district has a number of mixed-use projects that will be redeveloped in the early 21st century, and contains a significant number of active play fields and recreation centers when compared to the rest of the Center City. However, with I-395 to the north and South Capitol Street to the east acting as major barriers, the Southwest Waterfront area remains isolated from the rest of the Center City neighborhoods and the other parks and recreational amenities found there.

NoMa and the Capitol Riverfront are undergoing significant transformations from low-density, primarily industrial uses, to dense, mixed-use communities. However, these areas lack existing parks to accommodate the demand for recreational space from new residents and workers.

## Opportunities

Throughout the Center City, opportunities exist to improve the park system as a whole, including:

- ◆ Shape a greater understanding of the national significance of the historical and cultural resources of the Center City parks, grand avenues and streets, and the statues and monuments within them.
- ◆ Increase the recreational capacity of existing parks and open space through targeted capital improvements and maintenance beyond clean and safe.
- ◆ Build upon the existing structure of partnerships to address specific needs and coordinate park stewardship to improve efficiencies in management, programming, and maintenance.

Within Central Business Districts West and East, efforts were made to enliven many of the historic park spaces through physical improvements, such as new lighting, benches, and seasonal plantings, as well as free concerts and other events. Continued physical improvements and increased programming at the parks will enable them to better meet the recreational needs that residents, workers, and visitors in these areas desire. But it is not just park spaces that can meet these needs. The streets and sidewalks that surround the parks could support park-related events and activities, as well as associated public art, landscaping, sidewalk concessionaires, outdoor seating, signage, and special paving.

There is significant redevelopment in the Southwest Waterfront neighborhood. Of particular note are mixed-use developments at the former Waterside Mall and along the Washington Channel that will add high-quality open space in the form of retail streets, and new parks and plazas along the waterfront. An improved green streetscape throughout the neighborhood can connect these new spaces with the existing active recreation fields in the community, creating a network of parks and open space within the Southwest Waterfront neighborhood that meets a variety of its recreational needs. Further enhancement of the connections between the Southwest Waterfront and the other neighborhoods will improve the availability of a variety of parks and recreational activities for all residents, visitors, and workers within the Center City.

Within the NoMa and Capitol Riverfront neighborhoods, local workers, residents, developers, and business improvement districts are working with the District to explore alternative ways to create new parkland. In NoMa, the effort is focused on creating a linear network of parks and open space along First and K Streets, and on land associated with the Metropolitan Branch Trail. In the Capitol Riverfront, the community is working with the District to create Canal Park, a signature community park on property previously used for other municipal purposes. As these areas grow, opportunities for new public parks at other available public property or within private developments, such as the waterfront park at The Yards, will be pursued.

## Center City Parks Model Projects



Farragut Square is located between 17th, K and I Streets, NW.

### Farragut Square and Franklin Park

Farragut Square and Franklin Park, in Northwest DC, are under the National Park Service jurisdiction and provide 1.5 and 5 acres of historic parkland, respectively. Used during the day by commuters and office workers and with the potential to serve the growing downtown residential base on weekends, both parks suffer from a perception that they are unsafe due to a large number of homeless people often present in the area. Landscaping and design changes have occurred in each park over the years. The Downtown DC and the Golden Triangle Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) are active partners in maintaining and programming in the parks, as well as addressing issues related to homelessness and safety.



Studios Architecture

A 2009 Canal Park rendering shows a cafe, water feature and plaza.

### Canal Park

Washington Canal Park is a 1.8 acre public park planned by the District and the Capitol Riverfront BID for the center of an emerging high density, mixed-use development district along M Street, SEA, near Nationals Park and the United States Department of Transportation headquarters. Located in an area underserved in park and recreational resources, the park will transform a contaminated and abandoned bus lot to create a new amenity in a growing community, offering a place for active and passive recreation, a setting for public art, unique water and sustainable elements, and other programmed uses. The park is scheduled to open to the public in 2011.



DC Office of Planning

Plans for First Street were first identified in the DC Office of Planning's 2006 NoMa Vision Plan and Development Strategy.

### NoMa First Street, NE Linear Park

The First Street, NE network of open space is one component of a park and open-space strategy for the emerging NoMa area. The open spaces, most of which are yet to be constructed, will be created in the existing street right-of-way and along the Metropolitan Branch Trail in an area that lacks park and open-space amenities. The NoMa BID projects significant development levels through 2015 which could bring over 15,000 new residents to the NoMa community, increasing the demand for park and recreational resources. A 33-foot setback on each side of First Street will provide a setting for the linear park, offering generous room for gathering places, seating, landscaping, and other design elements to complement the new mixed-use neighborhood.

## Center City Parks Model Projects



Courtesy of Disurbed, 2000

“Sounds in the Square” is a summer concert series in Farragut Square sponsored by the Golden Triangle BID.

## Lessons Learned

- ◆ Center City parks are truly urban and unique from other parks in Washington’s surrounding neighborhoods. The experiences they offer, both in use and character, should be celebrated. These parks should not be made to conform with idealized suburban park landscapes and uses.
- ◆ Due to their continuity and mission, the BIDs in the Center City represent strong partnership opportunities to move from a clean and safe standard for the parks to something higher that reflects the quality of the new surrounding development. Specific partnerships, however, should be tailored to best suit the requirements and needs of the individual BIDs and park agencies.
- ◆ A park’s period of historical significance and new maintenance requirements are primary factors when considering new design elements.
- ◆ Programming, vending, partnership agreements, and other support services can add vitality to a park. At the NPS managed parks, some of these can be achieved through existing NPS legislation, policies, and regulations. However, desired modern urban uses of these spaces often conflict with the NPS’ service-wide management and preservation methods for its traditional parks.
- ◆ The District has demonstrated its willingness to re-purpose city land for parks.
- ◆ Local community and business groups are willing to raise funds for design, construction, maintenance, and programming if assured some level of control.
- ◆ Coordinated development and creative use of area-wide public space can bring about results on a large scale not possible on a site-by-site basis.
- ◆ Development guidelines for public space maintained by adjacent property owners is one strategy to promote a high-quality environment and community identity.
- ◆ Sustainable design practices that balance paving and landscaped areas can promote walkability and define community image.

## Recommendations

# Enhance Center City Parks

The DC Office of Planning began the Mount Vernon Square District Project in 2009, which includes recommendations for improving parks and open space in the neighborhood.



### Meet Park and Open Space Demands (CCP-1)

Increase capacity of existing parks by improving quality, diversity in amenities, programming, and access to green spaces.

- ◆ Identify and target capital improvements to repair and replace infrastructure and amenities, including quality landscaping, that will allow increased park usage.
- ◆ Explore the implementation and implication of a no net loss of green space approach for outdoor active recreational amenities.
- ◆ Identify opportunities to repurpose publicly owned spaces for park use.
- ◆ Consider the capacity of parks to function as neighborhood amenities when designing memorial and monument installations.
- ◆ Where appropriate, and to the maximum extent possible, re-establish public access to outdoor public spaces that have been closed for safety and security reasons, including schools and federal facilities.
- ◆ Enhance connections between parks with improved green streetscapes that include pedestrian and bicycle facilities.
- ◆ Create and maintain an online system for information on federal and local government park resources.

### Build Stronger Partnerships and Resources (CCP-2)

Build and strengthen community support through partnerships with businesses, residents, workers, and visitors.

- ◆ While maintaining tailored approaches within partnerships to address specific needs, coordinate park stewardship to improve efficiencies in management, programming, and maintenance.
- ◆ Maintain and build on existing arrangements with Business Improvement Districts and other groups to supplement maintenance and programming.
- ◆ The District and federal agencies should develop management, maintenance, and programming guidelines for required publicly accessible open space on private sites.
- ◆ The District should identify one responsible agency or office to manage District agreements regarding parks and open spaces with developers or other responsible parties.

## Recommendations



This section of Indiana Avenue across from the Grand Army of the Republic Memorial plaza is an example of how Center City sidewalks can be transformed into a parklike greenway.

### Utilize Placemaking and Programming to Expand Recreational Opportunities (CCP-3)

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Create unique places for neighborhoods, strengthen the overall identity of parks and open space, and identify strategies to expand programs and amenity options.

- ◆ Identify specific parks for tailored design and programming efforts to encourage public use and celebrate the uniqueness of the neighborhood.
- ◆ Incorporate sustainable design features, low-impact development, and other greening techniques into new and existing parks and park improvements.
- ◆ Establish design guidelines that reinforce existing regulations promoting visual openness and continuity in the corridors between park spaces.
- ◆ Research, identify, and reinforce historical design elements as defining characteristics of Center City parks, including the use of elements like rounded curbs, fences, and benches that have been used historically in Center City parks. Create a palette of elements that are a basis on which to build additional amenities.
- ◆ Use elements such as public art, landscaping, sidewalk concessionaires, outdoor seating, street furniture, and special paving as a way to connect events and activities in parks to adjacent spaces and the surrounding neighborhood.
- ◆ Research, define historical significance, and build an understanding and appreciation of the park and neighborhood history through increased signage, promotions, programming, and other opportunities.
- ◆ Pursue changes to laws, regulations, and policies for both District and NPS parks within the Center City to allow greater flexibility in programming and appropriate concessions that would encourage additional public use within the parks and on adjacent rights-of-way.

PLANNING CONCEPTS



Increase Access to Great Local Parks



Celebrate Urban Parks



Link the City with Green Corridors



Expand Park System Capacity



African-American Civil War Memorial at U Street and Vermont Avenue, NW

**OBJECTIVES**

Coordinated planning and management of small parks among federal and District agencies provides clear guidance on their purposes, level of maintenance, and jurisdictional responsibilities.

Partnerships with business and community organizations are effective in maintaining many of the small parks and providing appropriate programming to address national and local cultural and recreation needs.