

EXTENDING THE LEGACY



PLANNING AMERICA'S CAPITAL FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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INTRODUCTION

Washington has been described as “a city of magnificent distances,” and few who have seen it would disagree. As impressive as its buildings and monuments is its remarkable openness. Its broad avenues and expansive public spaces are reminders of America’s democratic values, symbolizing a government that is accessible to its people and a nation with room to grow. “To change a wilderness into a city, to erect and beautify buildings . . . to that degree of perfection necessary to receive the seat of government of so extensive an empire” — that is how Pierre L’Enfant described his vision for Washington. In every direction are reminders of a larger order of things that say “America’s Capital.”

Now imagine that same city so jammed with tourists that visiting the Capitol, the Lincoln Memorial and other national monuments becomes a numbing ordeal; a city immobilized by cars and buses, where precious open space is routinely devoured by chaotic development; a city sharply divided between a federal precinct for tourists and government workers, and commercial and residential districts for everyone else.

These are not alarmist fantasies but a plausible description of things to come unless Washington redefines its Monumental Core, which extends from the steps of the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial and Arlington Cemetery, and from the White House to the Potomac and Anacostia rivers. Laid out by Pierre L’Enfant in 1791, then refined and amplified by the McMillan Commission in 1901, this is the Washington of postcards and movies and the evening news, the Washington that everyone comes to see.

Over 20 million people visit the nation’s capital each year, a number that is expected to double by the middle of the next century. Most of these visitors flock to the museums and memorials around the Mall. Yet now that the last Mall site has been committed, locations for a dozen new museums and as many as 60 new memorials and monuments must be found elsewhere in the city. Even with pressure for leaner government, new homes for some Cabinet departments and perhaps the Supreme Court will have to be built. The flurry of new embassies, consulates and foreign trade missions, evidence of Washington’s prominence as an international city, will also have to be accommodated. With a farsighted plan, these new buildings can be located where they will expand the local economy and enrich community life instead of being dropped helter-skelter onto whatever site happens to be available.

Extending the Legacy is such a plan. Prepared by the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC), the federal government's planning agency in the District of Columbia and surrounding counties in Maryland and Virginia, it addresses the problems of the Monumental Core with bold proposals for transportation, community revitalization, public building and open space, including 22 miles of connected public waterfront on both sides of the Potomac and Anacostia rivers.

The Monumental Core is the symbolic heart of the nation and the physical expression of our Constitution with its three separate branches of government. It is also our national gathering place, where parades and protests and national celebrations occur, where citizens go to observe government in action and to appreciate the nation's cultural and scientific achievements. And it is the economic center of Washington, where hundreds of thousands of people work and live.

Yet *Extending the Legacy* does more than preserve what is traditional and familiar. It redefines the Monumental Core to include adjacent portions of North, South and East Capitol streets. It reclaims and reconnects the city's waterfront, from Georgetown on the Potomac River to the National Arboretum on the Anacostia. It corrects old problems by removing portions of the Southeast/Southwest Freeway, adjacent railroad tracks and several bridges that have divided neighborhoods and dismembered Washington for decades. It addresses the District's urgent need for jobs, housing and mobility. And it creates opportunities for new parks, offices and transit centers in all quadrants of the city. The plan combines bold moves at an urban scale with precise surgical ones appropriate for neighborhoods. It is neither a policy document nor an abstract theoretical exercise. It is a physical plan informed by a vision of what Washington could be.

America has the resources and the imagination to create a more efficient and beautiful capital and to strengthen its position as a great international city. *Extending the Legacy* is a key instrument in bringing about this transformation.



Clockwise, from upper left: Revived Anacostia waterfront • The Capitol is the center of the expanded Monumental Core • New bridge at East Capitol Street • Site for new memorial on 10th Street, SW