

STAFF RECOMMENDATION



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CAPITALSPACE PLAN IDEAS TO ACHIEVE THE FULL POTENTIAL OF WASHINGTON'S PARKS AND OPEN SPACE

Washington, D.C.

Prepared by
the National Capital Planning Commission, the Government of the District of Columbia
and the National Park Service

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Abstract

The CapitalSpace plan is a multi-agency partnership initiative between the National Capital Planning Commission, several District agencies including the Office of Planning, the Departments of Parks and Recreation, the Environment, and Transportation, and the National Park Service. CapitalSpace provides a vision for a beautiful, high-quality, and unified park system for the nation's capital and six action-oriented "Big Ideas" focused on key areas to help make the vision a reality. These Six Big Ideas identify recommendations that can best be accomplished by the CapitalSpace partner agencies working together and are intended to maximize existing assets, address current and future needs, and capitalize on existing opportunities. They include ideas for new planning and development policies, physical improvements and uses, and coordinated approaches to programming and maintenance.

Authority

Adoption of *CapitalSpace: Ideas to Achieve the Full Potential of Washington's Parks and Open Space Plan* pursuant to 40 U.S.C. § 8711 et. seq.

Executive Director's Recommendation

The Commission:

Adopts the plan *CapitalSpace: Ideas to Achieve the Full Potential of Washington's Parks and Open Space*.

Directs staff to use CapitalSpace as guidance when evaluating and making recommendations for development proposals for parks and public spaces within Washington, D.C.; and further, to advise all applicants to use the plan as a guide when programming, planning, and designing future development proposals.

Directs staff to incorporate the recommendations of CapitalSpace when developing or amending future NCPC planning studies and reports, including the Federal Elements of the *Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital*, and the *Federal Capital Improvements Program*.

Directs staff to use CapitalSpace as a guide when providing input into federal, local, and private planning studies and reports to facilitate implementation of the plan recommendations.

Directs staff to incorporate into the agency's annual work program administration of quarterly CapitalSpace partnership meetings and, with the collaboration of CapitalSpace partners, development of an annual status report to be made readily available to the partner agencies, external park partners, and the public.

Directs staff to commence work immediately on CapitalSpace's seven priority action items; commence work on the other CapitalSpace recommendations as opportunities occur; and use CapitalSpace to inform future updates of the agency Strategic Plan.

Directs staff to report back to the Commission annually on the status of CapitalSpace's key priority action items and other recommendations.

Directs staff to incorporate minor changes to the plan in response to comments and direction provided by the Commission; any technical corrections; and necessary clarifications to the text and graphics prior to publication of the final plan.

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DESCRIPTION OF THE CAPITALSPACE PLAN

Washington is a city of parks. With its many large and small neighborhood parks, school yards, formal downtown parks, stream valley corridors, forest preserves, and green river banks of the Potomac and Anacostia, it is graced with more green space per person than any other U.S. city of its size. In addition, while known the world over for the symbolic power of the National Mall, parks and open space throughout Washington's neighborhoods have historic attributes and commemorative features that make them signature elements of the nation's capital.

Although Washington's parks and open space are abundant and beloved, the quality of the parks and open space and their uses has not kept pace with the desires of expanding resident and worker populations or millions of annual visitors. To help address this cooperatively, federal and District of Columbia agencies formed the CapitalSpace partnership.

The CapitalSpace partner agencies, the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC), the District of Columbia Office of Planning (DCOP) and Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), and the National Park Service (NPS) began by completing the first comprehensive

analysis of all of Washington's parks and open space in nearly 40 years. Recognizing that planning and management efforts are currently underway to enhance the National Mall and parks along the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers, CapitalSpace is focused on other national and local parks in the neighborhoods throughout Washington. This analysis found that within Washington's park system, the wide variety of park types, sizes, and traits, coupled with shared jurisdiction between local and federal authorities, presents challenges in meeting both local and national needs, as well as difficulties in planning, enhancing, and maintaining the parks.

Yet the analysis also found that there are tremendous opportunities to ensure that Washington's parks are accessible to everyone who lives in, works in, or visits the city. The city's parks and open spaces can connect communities; provide a diversity of passive and active recreation that enhances urban living; and offer rich natural, cultural, commemorative and historic resources that define neighborhoods and provide unique experiences. The CapitalSpace plan highlights the critical role parks play in achieving District and federal goals for a healthy, sustainable and livable city.

The CapitalSpace plan is not a comprehensive plan that addresses all park issues and park sites, nor is it a plan that addresses physical improvements at specific parks. Instead, the plan provides a vision for a beautiful, high-quality, and unified park system for Washington and six action-oriented big ideas focused on key areas to help make the vision a reality. These Six Big Ideas identify recommendations that can best be accomplished by the CapitalSpace partner agencies working together and are intended to maximize existing assets, address current and future needs, and capitalize on existing opportunities. They include ideas for new planning and development policies, physical improvements and uses, and approaches to operation and maintenance. CapitalSpace sets the framework for an enduring partnership between federal and District agencies.

The Six Big Ideas are:

Link the Fort Circle Parks by implementing a greenway and making the parks destination:

- Promote the fort parks as national historic, cultural, and recreational treasures and provide opportunities for residents and visitors to explore, interpret, and visualize their history.
- Increase public access to the Fort Circle Parks by connecting them to other parks, schools, and other destinations.
- Activate the fort parks and greenways through selective park uses that draw residents and visitors to their rich natural environment and cultural history.
- Protect and celebrate the diverse and significant natural resources of the fort parks.

Improve public schoolyards to help relieve the pressure on nearby parks and better connect children with the environment

- Develop a comprehensive schoolyard improvement strategy that assesses needs, provides standards for improvements, prioritizes projects, and is coordinated with the District's school modernization process.
- Preserve schoolyards for community recreation space and improving public access.
- Develop guidelines for schoolyard planning including establishing safe and secure play environments, active recreation components, low-impact development opportunities, and environmental education curricula.

- Clarify agency responsibilities for general schoolyard maintenance and develop partnerships to provide for enhancements.

Enhance urban natural areas and better connecting residents to encourage urban stewardship for natural resources

- Coordinate future research and share environmental data among federal and local agencies and their partners.
- Protect park natural resources.
- Adopt clear, consistent, and shared goals and guidelines among responsible agencies and adjacent jurisdictions for long-term park and natural resource management.
- Build a green infrastructure network within our natural areas to perform many of the same services as drainage pipes and spillways.

Improve playfields to meet the needs of residents, workers, and visitors

- Maintain or expand the current level of service for recreation facilities within Washington.
- Increase capacity through field assessments, use, improvement plans, and capital programs coordinated among responsible agencies.
- Simplify the permitting process between NPS, DPR, and DCPS and coordinate fees, signage, and enforcement.

Enhance Center City parks and open space to meet support a vibrant downtown

- Increase park use by improving quality, quantity, access, and connections.
- Build and strengthen park constituency support through formal partnerships with individuals, businesses, and organizations.
- Create unique places for neighborhoods, strengthen the overall identity of parks, and use public spaces around parks to expand programs and amenities.

Transform small parks into successful public spaces, forming a cohesive urban network of green spaces

- Organize small parks into clusters, where appropriate, to coordinate their uses and physical improvement.
- Coordinate planning and management of small parks among the various park and planning agencies for efficiency and promote investments across all small park resources.
- Provide neighborhood-oriented programming and improvements for small parks to ensure they are clean and safe to enhance neighborhood livability.
- Leverage related investments and tap into funding unique to small parks.

Each of the Six Big Ideas has recommendations intended to provide environmental, historic, cultural, and recreational benefits, and support shared goals for a greener, sustainable, and healthier city for all residents, workers, and visitors. These recommendations include actions to improve access; enhance the quality of existing spaces; develop strategies for programming, design and use to better accommodate diverse park visitor needs; and to create education and information activities. Some recommendations may be achieved relatively quickly, while others will advance incrementally and take a number of years to fully complete.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CAPITALSPACE PLAN

Actions by the CapitalSpace partner agencies

To strategically move the CapitalSpace plan forward, priority actions were identified by the partner agencies for focused attention and action in the next few years. All partner agencies will contribute in different ways, although some actions have a clear agency leader. Successful implementation of these actions will only be accomplished through strong coordination with community and stakeholder organizations, many of whom expressed interest in working together on these projects.

The priority actions are:

Promote the value of the Fort Circle Parks:

Increase public awareness of the numerous historic, natural, and recreational resources within the Fort Circle Parks, building upon NPS's development of a new wayside plan.

Complete the Fort Circle Parks trail:

Finalize the trail alignment and identify connections from the trail to transit, schools, and other community parks and recreational activities. Identify funding opportunities to implement the trail and associated connections and infrastructure, including improved streetscape conditions, trail crossings, and signage.

Improve the availability and use of playfields:

Guide renovations and improve the scheduling and use of recreational fields through coordinated assessment and maintenance programs. Improve the permitting of fields by developing an on-line permitting system for all NPS, DPR, and DCPS facilities; improve and coordinate field allocation and use policies; align permit fees; and provide clear field use information.

Ensure that schoolyards meet community recreational needs:

Ensure that schoolyards can be used as open space by surrounding neighborhoods. Develop approaches to strengthen neighborhood involvement in the planning process for the modernization and redevelopment of schools and their yards.

Launch a city-wide ecosystem consortium:

Coordinate ecological research associated with our natural resources in the District, and collectively identify and map these resources, implement restoration and protection strategies, and increase public awareness of the ecological functions of Washington's parks and open-space system.

Make Center City parks more inviting and active:

Explore opportunities to improve existing Center City parks and surrounding streets and sidewalks through physical enhancements, further programming, and activation. This will allow the parks and street spaces to be better used by the community while retaining their national and historic significance.

Improve the maintenance and use of small parks:

Categorize the small parks and triangles throughout the District by geographic area, function, natural and cultural resources, and other characteristics. Develop a shared

database to identify opportunities for improved efficiencies in their management by multiple agencies.

One of the most valuable outcomes of the CapitalSpace initiative is the development of shared goals, improved communication, and strengthened relationships between the partner agencies. These outcomes will allow the partners to better promote opportunities and address challenges facing Washington's parks. To further strengthen interagency communication and working relationships, the partner agencies are committed to holding quarterly meetings and developing an annual CapitalSpace status report to track progress on key action items. Further, the partner agencies have identified the following issues to be the subject of continuing inter-agency coordination. Additional information on these issues can be found within the draft final plan beginning on page 91.

Collaborate on Overarching Issues

Several overarching recommendations arose in the development of the Six Big Ideas that partner agencies believe should be incorporated into any park project: expand and coordinate public information; improve coordination for ongoing maintenance; align plan document recommendations; expand green job developments; and use sustainable practices to construct, maintain and program parks. Further, the partners will continue to work together on opportunities for new or more accessible park and open space.

Maximize Resources

The CapitalSpace partners are committed to advancing recommendations by working together, which can help leverage limited budgets and bring additional resources from other agencies and external groups to advance projects, programs, and activities. The partner agencies will look for opportunities to maximize their resources by coordinating work plans, capital improvement budgets, and other programs, where appropriate.

Build Partnerships

There are tremendous opportunities to forge partnerships to improve Washington's parks, which combine the assets of the public and private sectors in creative ways. NPS and DPR maintain standard partnership programs, which can be tailored to meet specific goals and reflect the requirements of the parent agency. The partner agencies are committed to strengthening park partnerships by connecting interested partners to the right agency through improved information sharing; exploring legislative changes that could provide increased partnering flexibility; and identifying opportunities for agencies to jointly enter into cooperative agreements with a single partnership organization.

In summary, to implement the recommendations of CapitalSpace, the partner agencies have identified seven priority actions for focused attention and action in the next few years and have made commitments for continuing to working together in measuring progress, coordinating on overarching park and open space issues, maximizing resources, and building partnerships. **As such, staff recommends that the Commission adopt the plan *CapitalSpace: Ideas to Achieve the Full Potential of Washington's Parks and Open Space*.**

Actions Specific to the National Capital Planning Commission

CapitalSpace provides a vision for a beautiful, high-quality, and unified park system for the nation's capital and six action-oriented "Big Ideas" focused on key areas to help make the vision a reality. While the effort to develop CapitalSpace was extensive, continued effort will be critical to ensure that the recommendations of the plan are fully considered and incorporated as appropriate into future planning initiatives and development proposals. To accomplish this, there are several things that NCPC should do.

In NCPC's role as the federal government's central planning agency in the nation's capital, the Commission should consider CapitalSpace's recommendations in the process of evaluating all future development proposals within the study area of Washington, D.C. Staff should also advise all applicant agencies that the Commission has adopted CapitalSpace and that its recommendations should be considered at the earliest stages of their project development process. **Staff recommends that the Commission direct staff to use CapitalSpace as guidance when evaluating and making recommendations for development proposals to parks and public spaces within Washington, D.C.; and advise all applicants to use the plan as a guide when programming, planning, and designing future development proposals.**

NCPC staff should also use the plan as a guide when providing input into federal, local and private planning studies and reports; and when developing or amending NCPC planning studies and reports including the *Comprehensive Plan for the Nation's Capital: Federal Elements*, and the *Federal Capital Improvements Program (FCIP)*. In the limited instances where the plan may suggest how specific public or private properties could be improved, NCPC encourages those decision-makers to consider the planning recommendations that could help to achieve the goals of this plan. **Staff recommends that the Commission direct staff to use CapitalSpace as a guide when providing input into federal, local, and private planning studies and reports to facilitate moving the plan recommendations toward implementation; and that staff should incorporate recommendations of CapitalSpace when developing or amending future NCPC planning studies and reports including the Comprehensive Plan and the FCIP.**

The CapitalSpace partners have agreed to maintain CapitalSpace quarterly meetings to discuss shared challenges and opportunities. These meetings will supplement ongoing communications between the partners on coordinating park and open space activities and ensure that CapitalSpace action items are being implemented. The partners have also agreed to develop an annual CapitalSpace status report to track progress on CapitalSpace's key action items, including developing park partnerships, coordinating management issues, projects where external park partners have been successfully, and developing a work plan of new action items for the upcoming year. NCPC's role as the federal government's central planning agency in the nation's capital places it in a key position to ensure continued interagency collaboration in these quarterly meetings and the development of the annual status report. **As such, staff recommends that the Commission direct staff to incorporate into the agency's annual work program the administration of quarterly CapitalSpace partnership meetings and, with the collaboration of CapitalSpace partners, the development of an annual status report to be made readily available to the partner agencies, external park partners, and the public.**

Through NCPC's responsibilities for coordinating and advancing important planning initiatives in the nation's capital, this agency should continue to champion CapitalSpace's principles. To accomplish this, staff should identify and establish federal and local partnerships that can assist

in moving the recommendations of the plan toward implementation. In addition, staff should also advance the planning efforts contained in CapitalSpace in accordance with the agency strategic plan and available resources, and use the plan to inform future updates of the agency strategic plan. Finally, to ensure that the Commission remains focused on implementing the plan's recommendations, staff should report back to the Commission annually on the status of the CapitalSpace Plan's key action priorities. **Staff recommends that the Commission direct staff to commence work immediately on CapitalSpace's seven priority action items; commence work on the other CapitalSpace recommendations as the opportunity presents itself; use CapitalSpace to inform future updates of the agency Strategic Plan, and report back to the Commission annually on the status of the key priority action items and other recommendations.**

CapitalSpace is a draft document until such time as the Commission takes action to adopt the document under its authority within the National Capital Planning Act (40 U.S.C. § 8711 et. seq.) to comprehensively plan for the physical development of the National Capital Region. Within its review of the draft final Plan, the Commission may provide staff with changes to incorporate into the document. Likewise, prior to publication of the adopted document, staff may be required to make technical corrections and necessary clarifications to the text and graphics. **As such, staff recommends that the Commission direct staff to incorporate any changes to the plan in response to: comments and direction provided by the Commission; any technical corrections; and necessary clarifications to the text and graphics prior to publication of the final plan.**

PREVIOUS COMMISSION ACTION

Staff briefings on CapitalSpace were provided to the Commission on December 1, 2005; April 5, 2007; and December 4, 2008.

On October 1, 2009 the Commission reviewed the draft CapitalSpace plan and directed staff to circulate the draft plan for a 60-day public comment period, which started on October 8, 2009, for the purposes of obtaining and considering input from federal departments and agencies, state and local governments, regional agencies, and interested organizations and individuals prior to preparation of a draft final plan for review and approval by the Commission.

Comments received during the public review period can be grouped into four areas:

1) Improved public access to open space on the Armed Forces Retirement Home and within the surrounding communities

The largest number of comments received noted that the plan did not address the need for improved public access to parks and open space for the surrounding neighborhoods of the Armed Forces Retirement Home (AFRH), including improved connections between existing and potential open space amenities. A common message was that the plan should support making open space on the AFRH publicly-accessible. In response to these comments, the partner agencies have included language on pages 29 and 99 of the draft final CapitalSpace plan, that broadly discusses this issue and reaffirms the existing agency commitments to work together in the future on opportunities for parks and open spaces, including at the AFRH.

2) *Implementation*

Comments on implementation issues were common, including questions on how the agency partnership would continue, how projects are prioritized and funded, and how organizations can coordinate with the agencies.

Agency partnership: Many comments noted that coordination among the partner agencies has been limited in the past and wanted to know how this might change, and how the partner agencies specifically plan to maintain coordination to implement the recommendations.

Prioritization and funding of recommendations: Many comments asked about projects that will be done and establishing benchmarks for performance. Other comments noted that the plan lacks a bigger picture prioritization of projects and a strong commitment of resources by all the agencies. Comment letters requested information on funding, funding sources and how the partner agencies will maintain parks, stating that the plan needs to better address budgeting and long-term maintenance and care issues.

Coordination with organizations: Many organizations positively noted in their comments that they are eager to get involved, and wanted to discuss with the partner agencies how they could help move recommendations forward.

In response to the comments on implementation, the partner agencies have strengthened their commitments to work together on moving the plan's recommendations forward, with a focus on the seven priority actions. To aid in this coordination, the partner agencies have committed to holding quarterly meetings and to developing a public annual report on progress. The report will pull into one place action items the partners agree to target in the upcoming year, recognizing that each agency already has a number of related activities underway. The partner agencies also have clarified their commitment to continued collaboration in these areas: providing park planning and operation information to the public; ongoing maintenance, aligning comprehensive plan and other plan policies and recommendations with those within CapitalSpace; developing green job programs associated with improving and maintaining Washington's park space; and developing sustainable management practices. In addition, the partner agencies made further commitments to maximize resources by better coordinating current and future work plans and capital budgets as they relate to Washington's park system. Discussions on these commitments are included within a revised *Moving the Plan Forward* section within the draft final plan, beginning on page 91.

3) *Improvements or programming of specific activities or park types*

Some comments asked for the plan to better address specific programming needs (for example: improved trails and information for bicycling or better rowing facilities) or to better address improvements of specific park types (such as stream valleys, waterfronts, and escarpment associated green spaces). In response to these comments, additional language is included on pages 3 and 6 of the draft final plan that explains that the CapitalSpace plan is not a comprehensive plan that addresses all park issues and park sites, nor is it a plan that addresses physical improvements at specific parks. Instead, the plan provides a vision for Washington's park system and six action-oriented "Big Ideas" focused on key areas to help make the vision a reality.

4) *Tying to larger community issues and building community support*

Many comments wanted improved linkages of the plan's recommendations to District-wide issues such as sustainable development, job creation, crime fighting, health, and walkable and bicycle-friendly neighborhoods. Some comments noted that the Mayor's green summer job program is a significant opportunity to help further these ideas and that a lot can be done using summer employment to improve parks. To address these comments in the draft final CapitalSpace plan, the partner agencies enhanced the narrative within the *Benefits of Parks and Open Space* section, beginning on page 14, to highlight District-specific benefits.

On February 4, 2010 staff briefed the Commission on the public comments received and the approaches taken within the draft final CapitalSpace plan to address them. All public comments are available for review at www.capitalspace.gov.

NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT AND NATIONAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION ACT

No environmental or historic preservation review was undertaken for CapitalSpace because the plan is advisory. Once the final plan is adopted and plan recommendations are considered for implementation, appropriate environmental and historic preservation review will be initiated.

CONSULTATION

The lead agencies for the CapitalSpace initiative have been NCPC, NPS, DCOP, and DPR; other agencies, notably the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, the District's Department of the Environment, Department of Transportation, and Office of Public Education Facilities Management, have also been substantially involved. At key points in the plan development process, steering committee meetings were conducted with representatives from these agencies, including both the NPS regional office and the park superintendents of the primary park units within the District.

During the development of the needs assessment, interviews were conducted of key public and private stakeholders. During the development of each of the six big ideas, partner agency staff identified and coordinated with non-profit, business and citizen stakeholder groups to develop background, review materials, and discuss possible recommendations. In particular, case studies using existing park and open space sites were used to provide specific examples and lessons learned in developing the big ideas.

Staff also provided a forum for citizens, interest groups and key stakeholders to identify and provide valuable input on potential opportunities, issues and strategies in the plan. Two public meetings were held on April 5, 2007 and May 20, 2008 at the downtown Martin Luther King Jr. Library. Interested parties have included Washington Parks and People, the Casey Tree Foundation, the Washington Central Parks Alliance, and the business improvement districts in Washington's Center City. A website, www.capitalspace.gov, was established, and staff has posted a number of draft plan components as they have been reviewed by the partner agencies to provide the public with early opportunities to review these plans.

On October 1, 2009 the Commission reviewed the October 8, 2009 draft CapitalSpace plan and directed staff to circulate the draft plan for a 60-day public comment period for the purposes of obtaining and considering input from federal departments and agencies, state and local governments, regional agencies, and interested organizations and individuals prior to preparation of a final plan for review and approval by the Commission. During the public comment period, staff conducted a focused public outreach effort with interested parties that wished to comment on the CapitalSpace proposals. The draft CapitalSpace plan was presented at a public meeting on October 27, 2009 which was advertised via newspaper and email “blasts.” In addition, partner agency staff and the consultant team conducted discussions with key stakeholders focused around moving the plan concepts forward.

Following the closure of the public comment period on December 8, 2009, NCPC and the partner agencies refined the CapitalSpace plan and discussed public comments with the partner agency steering committee.