The Department of General Services (DGS), in conjunction with DC Public Schools (DCPS), has submitted preliminary site and building plans to modernize the School Without Walls at the Francis-Stevens (SWWFS) School. The project is located at 2425 N Street, NW, in Washington, DC, adjacent to Rock Creek Park. SWWFS occupies the Francis-Stevens Junior High School building which has been a civic institution in the District’s West End neighborhood since the first portion of the building was completed in 1927. The building has gained a series of additions and new wings over time. The school has remained in continuous use throughout its history.

Stevens Elementary School and Francis Junior High School were both historic schools in the District of Columbia. Thaddeus Stevens Elementary School was located at 1050 21st Street, NW. The Stevens School was built in 1868 as one of the first publicly funded schools for African American children, and before its closing in June 2008, it was the city's oldest school in continuous operation. The Stevens School was added to the DC Inventory of Historic Sites on June 20, 1972, and the National Register of Historic Places on July 12, 2001. Francis Junior High School, located at 2425 N Street, NW, was built in 1927 to serve poor African American students whose families lived in Foggy Bottom, as well as African American students from Georgetown. Except for the addition of a gymnasium in the 1950s, the Francis School today is the same as it was in the 1920s. After promoting its last class of ninth graders at the close of the 2006-2007 school year, Francis became a middle school.

DGS states the intent of the project is to provide an inspiring facility that showcases the best of the historical elements of the original 1920s and 1950s architecture, while simultaneously providing both modernized and new learning spaces that complement the school’s educational and cultural goals. The design intends to be a model of how sustainable design can be gracefully integrated within a historic existing building, creating a 21st-century school that fosters and inspires the next generation of environmental stewards.

DGS notes that during the public engagement process, the project team developed nine design principles which summarize the aspirations of the various stakeholders into unified goals for the project’s design. These design principles will continue to serve as guidelines for how to make the
The best decisions for the project and the community for future phases of the process. They are as follows:

1. Enhance and celebrate connection to the outdoors
2. Reinforce the relationship with Rock Creek Park
3. Provide a place that enhances the sense of community
4. Demonstrate a high-performance, healthy learning space
5. Defer to the civic presence of the historic structures
6. Create opportunities for connections between grades
7. Put learning on display
8. Embrace equitable student-centered spaces
9. Create a professional nurturing environment

The design principles focus on civic presence, sustainability, high quality learning and working environments and most importantly creating/maintaining strong connections within and without the building.

The proposed renovation expands the building area of Francis Stevens by about 30 percent. Some of this additional space comes from an extension of the existing east wing and the enclosure of what is now a service courtyard between the 1950s wing and the 1920s building. The majority of the new space is being added in a new 3-story academic wing on the west side of the existing building. Connecting corridors are provided to improve circulation throughout the expanded
building footprint. The building size will increase from 109,000 square feet to 126,000 square feet, which includes a new gymnasium, additional classroom space, courtyard space, and redesigned library.

This proposal includes an addition on the west side of the building and expansion/infill of the east side of the building around a newly renovated and expanded gymnasium. The proposal also seeks to meet a Net Zero Energy goal with the installation of solar panels at the site, improved performance of the windows and walls, and possibly installing a new geothermal system. The applicant will seek a LEED rating for the building. Site work and landscaping includes a new parking area east of the building with student drop off area, new playgrounds, connections to the Rock Creek Park trails, and bio-retention areas.

The project was presented to the Coordinating Committee on September 14, 2022, with all participating agencies coordinating. Those agencies included the District of Columbia Office of Planning, the DC SHPO, the Department of Energy and Environment, the National Park Service, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, and the General Services Administration. The DC Historic Preservation Office noted via email that it would coordinate on this project subject to completion of the historic preservation review process required by Section 9b of the DC Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act and the Section 106 process, if applicable. Also, the District of Columbia Energy and the Environment noted via email that an approved tree preservation plan and Special Tree Removal Permit is required prior to the start of construction.

Staff has reviewed the submission and determined that the design is commendable for its sensitivity to the historic context, incorporating sustainable features, and compatibility with the site context. This project is also consistent with policies contained within the Urban Design, Historic Preservation, Transportation, and Federal Environment Elements of the Comprehensive Plan. The project location is adjacent to Rock Creek Park, which is administered by the National Park Service (NPS). According to the project plans, there will not be any improvements or impacts to NPS land. The applicant stated they have met with NPS to discuss the project and coordination will continue through construction.

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Pursuant to delegations of authority adopted by the Commission on April 1, 2021 and per 40 U.S.C. § 8722(b)(1), I approve the preliminary site and building plans for the modernization and expansion of the School Without Walls at the Francis Stevens School, located at 2425 N Street, NW in Washington, DC.

Marcel Acosta
Executive Director

9/29/2022