NCPC Approves Banneker Park Pedestrian and Cyclist Access Improvements

Commission Hears Information Presentations on National Air and Space Museum Exterior Cladding Options and the Purple Line

Washington, DC—At its April 6, 2017 monthly meeting the National Capital Planning Commission approved preliminary and final site development plans for access improvements at Banneker Park, submitted by the National Park Service and Hoffman-Madison Waterfront (developer of The Wharf). Plans call for a staircase and ramp that will provide an interim connection from the park to the southwest waterfront and create a temporary direct link from the National Mall to the waterfront while the area awaits future redevelopment associated with the SW Ecodistrict Plan and/or new memorial or museum proposals. In its approval the Commission commended the applicant’s coordination efforts with NCPC and other stakeholders, and recommended that the applicant consider adding additional tree plantings to provide shade for park users.

“This connection has been a long time coming,” said Commissioner Thomas Gallas. “The site now is an impenetrable wall, and this project will be so important to bring the waterfront into the city.”

The proposal includes new tree plantings, removal and replanting of existing Japanese Yew bushes, replacement of the current embankment, and improved lighting. The Banneker Connection will be the first SW Ecodistrict project implemented. The project is being designed and constructed as part of The Wharf development on the southwest waterfront. The applicants anticipate the project’s October completion to coincide with the opening of The Wharf’s first phase. Banneker Park, designed by landscape architect Dan Kiley, opened in 1969.

The Commission also heard two information presentations. In the first presentation, representatives from the Smithsonian Institution showed the four exterior cladding options under consideration as part of the proposed revitalization of the National Air and Space Museum, located on the National Mall. The existing Tennessee Pink Marble stone on the museum’s façade will be replaced; changes will be made to the skylights, curtain wall, building systems, and vestibules; and the terraces and landscaping surrounding the museum will be renovated. Cladding alternatives under consideration include Tennessee Pink Marble, other natural stones such as granite and limestone, and a manufactured material. The museum is one of the most popular in the world, with approximately seven million annual visitors.

While the Commission does not take official action on information presentations, they noted their appreciation for the thought that went into the four alternatives under consideration and for the mock-ups that presented how each alternative could look. Interest was expressed in the existing Tennessee Pink cladding, which mirrors the National Gallery of Art across the Mall from the museum, and a high performance concrete option.

NCPC, in cooperation with the Smithsonian Institution, prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) to analyze the potential impacts of these alternatives in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act. The EA is available to the public for review and comment through Monday, May 1. NCPC anticipates reviewing preliminary site and building plans for the project this summer.

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In the second presentation, representatives from the Maryland Transit Authority provided the Commission with an update on the Purple Line, a 16-mile long light rail line that will run from Bethesda to New Carrollton, Maryland with 21 stations. NCPC’s formal review authority will be focused on four segments: three Purple Line crossings through valley parks located on federally acquired parkland and a crossing under the federal Baltimore-Washington Parkway. Again, no action was taken but the Commission expressed its support for the project as an enhancement of mass transit in the region; the Purple Line’s future role to provide enhanced connectivity, including to several federal facilities and campuses; its potential impact on quality of place for the communities through which it will run; and its potential as a catalyst for growth. NCPC anticipates reviewing these components this summer.

This month’s agenda also included two consent calendar items (no presentations were given):

- Preliminary and final site and building plans for renovation of, and an addition to, the Smithsonian Zoological Park’s Bird House, 3001 Connecticut Avenue, NW. (7673)
- Final site development plans for renovation of the National Museum of Natural History's south entrance, 1000 Constitution Avenue, NW. (7753)

In addition, the Executive Director approved five items, under authority delegated by the Commission. Staff recommendations are available on NCPC’s website.

The National Capital Planning Commission is the federal government’s central planning agency in Washington, DC and surrounding counties of Maryland and Virginia. The Commission provides overall guidance for federal land and buildings in the region. It also reviews the design of federal projects and memorials, oversees long-range planning for future development, and monitors capital investment by federal agencies.

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