NCPC Approves Preliminary South Mall Campus Historic Core Plans with a Few Exceptions

Commission updated on site evaluations for two new Smithsonian museums and plans for the National Air and Space Museum Bezos Learning Center

Washington, DC—National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) review for major projects involves several stages of development, with feedback provided at each step before final review and approval. One theme at the Thursday, March 3 Commission meeting was that project applicants paid careful attention to previous NCPC input and addressed the Commission’s prior comments, improving previous submissions.

NCPC approved preliminary site and building plans submitted by the Smithsonian Institution for revitalization of the South Mall Campus Historic Core, except for the perimeter security, cooling towers and proposed new elevator shaft overrun at the Castle. The project includes a comprehensive rehabilitation of the Smithsonian Institution Building (the Castle) and the Arts and Industries Building to address physical deterioration, obsolete systems, and non-compliance with construction, accessibility, and life-safety codes.

Other components include new underground facilities, a new central utility plant (with new cooling towers located across the Mall adjacent to the National Museum of Natural History), accessibility improvements, garden rehabilitation, new perimeter security, and an enhanced loading dock to serve the two buildings. The project does not include improvements to the Quadrangle Building (located underneath the Haupt Garden), new entry pavilions, or the removal and replacement of the Haupt Garden. Planning for these components will be done separately in approximately five years.

The Smithsonian prepared alternatives for perimeter security along Jefferson Drive adjacent to the Arts and Industries Building and the Castle, as well as a single design along Independence Avenue in front of the Arts and Industries Building. The Commission raised concerns about potential impacts to views, access, and public circulation, and requested that the Smithsonian continue to explore perimeter security options along Jefferson Drive and Independence Avenue, in coordination with other federal and District agencies.

“It is exciting to see some of the critical work of the South Mall Master Plan being implemented and the continued restoration of these historic landmarks,” said NCPC Chair Beth White. “It is important to get the perimeter security right. This project is about trade-offs and finding balance between historic preservation and public space. Adding a layer of perimeter security will undoubtedly change the public space that exists today and have impacts to historic preservation. I want to take the time to look at this holistically and find the best solution.”

The Castle was designed by James Renwick, Jr. and completed in 1855. Its last major renovation was in 1968. The Arts and Industries Building was designed by Adolf Cluss and Paul Schulze and constructed between 1879 and 1881. Its last renovation was in 2014. Both buildings are National Historic Landmarks.

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Smithsonian Institution staff presented two information presentations (no official Commission action is taken on these). They updated NCPC on the status of the Smithsonian’s site evaluation study for two new museums: the National Museum of the American Latino and the American Women’s History Museum. Both museums were established in December 2020 though H.R. 133. The legislation provides that the Smithsonian Board of Regents determine sites for each museum by December 2022. NCPC has an advisory role in the site selection process and will review site and building plans for both museums during their design.

The Smithsonian continues to evaluate a number of potential museum sites which were divided into two tiers, with Tier One being sites that are more promising locations. Next steps include additional site evaluation and the development of architectural programming to reduce the number of potential sites and focus on the best options. NCPC anticipates a future update on the process this summer.

Commissioners expressed their excitement at the simultaneous development of two new Smithsonian museums and the positive impact they will have. NCPC Chair Beth White said “I continue to be impressed by the scale of this analysis and the task in front of the Smithsonian and museum sponsors this year. I imagine that these will not be the last two museums approved by Congress, so I encourage the Smithsonian to really evaluate this short list of sites. Some of these sites may not work this time around, but they could be good contenders in the future.”

Smithsonian staff then discussed the National Air and Space Museum Bezos Learning Center that will replace an existing restaurant on the museum’s east terrace. The learning center will be a physical and virtual center for immersive learning. The three-story facility will include a new ground level restaurant with a footprint similar to the current addition. The existing restaurant addition, constructed in 1988, closed in 2017 and is scheduled to be torn down this spring. Construction on the new center is targeted to begin in 2024 and last two years. NCPC will review plans for this new center. The National Air and Space Museum opened to the public in 1976.

The Commission approved the Fort Belvoir North Area Final Area Development Plan, with two exceptions. This master plan will provide a development framework for future functions at the 804-acre site located in Springfield, Virginia approximately two miles north of Fort Belvoir’s main installation. The plan proposes to create a secure intelligence community campus. Part of this includes locating a future Defense Intelligence Agency Headquarters Annex, parking garage, and utility plant, near the existing National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency in the site’s core area. A new distribution center would be located on the western portion. Future projects include a Joint Logistics Operations Center, another parking garage, an undisclosed tenant facility, and a fire station addition. The plan also addresses other areas of anticipated future development, including potential infrastructure.

The Commission was pleased that the updated plan addressed many of their prior concerns by concentrating more development in the core; considering taller, more dense development in this area; and eliminating new surface parking lots. While proposed development will remove substantial forested areas, the updated plan reduced these impacts through location and design choices. NCPC deferred review of a future parking garage and additional development around the distribution center until more is known about future needs.

NCPC approved preliminary site development plans for the National Desert Storm and Desert Shield Memorial submitted by the National Park Service in collaboration with the National Desert Storm War Memorial Association. The memorial will honor those who served on active duty as members of the Armed Forces in support of Operation Desert Storm and Operation Desert Shield, an international effort led by the United States in 1990 to liberate Kuwait. It will be located on an approximately 0.5-acre site located at the southwest intersection of Constitution Avenue and 23rd Street, NW.

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The proposed memorial would be enclosed by two asymmetrical berms inspired by the dune formations of the Kuwaiti desert landscape. One would feature a bas-relief that depicts the build-up of the operation, the troops on the ground, and the dawn of a new day. Patinated stainless steel sculptures of raptors in flight would be located on the wall. The other berm features an inscription wall that notes the ten significant battles. The memorial’s centerpiece is a cascading water feature that washes over a circular battle shield, The names of 35 countries that participated in the international Coalition would be engraved on the shield.

Commissioners commended the memorial’s landscape-oriented design that minimizes vertical elements and respects its open setting and views to the Lincoln Memorial and National Mall. They appreciated that the applicant changed the design to address many of the Commission’s previous comments, including simplifying the design’s commemorative framework to help visitors clearly understand the memorial’s purpose, adding more details to the central water feature, articulating how the cast sculptures of the falcon and eagle relate to the imagery on the wall, and eliminating previously proposed statues. For the final review, they requested information on potential wayfinding and whether the wall and berm angles are designed to prevent people from climbing on the memorial.

The Commission approved preliminary and final site and building plans submitted by the National Park Service, in coordination with the Federal Reserve Board, for revisions and reconstruction of a park at Reservation 378 located at Virginia Avenue between C and 21st Streets, NW. Reservation 378 is a 2.26-acre triangular shaped parcel north of the Federal Reserve Board of Governors William McChesney Martin Building. Originally designed in 1971, and redesigned in 1979, the park has a fountain, seating, public art, active and passive recreation areas, trees and sits above two underground parking garages.

The project will replace the roof of the underground garages and provide access improvements, which requires replacing the park’s existing landscape. A new entry kiosk to serve one of the underground garages will be in the park and replace an existing one. Commissioners thought that the current plans addressed their previous concerns, noting that the design will maintain as much of the park’s existing character as possible and that the new entrance kiosk’s design complements the Martin Building and will minimally impact the park. They complemented the applicant for incorporating components from the draft Monumental Core Streetscape Design Guidelines: Vertical and Surface Elements into the design.

The Commission also authorized the release of the Pennsylvania Avenue vision and concepts for a 120-day public comment period as part of its Consent Calendar. The vision and concepts were previously presented to the Commission at a February 16, 2022 special session. The comment period will begin on March 16 and run through July 13, 2022.

Commission actions and related materials are available online.

This month’s agenda included two consent calendar items (no presentations were given). Unless otherwise noted, all projects are in Washington, DC.

1. Authorization to release the Pennsylvania Avenue Vision and Concepts for a 120-day public comment period, Pennsylvania Avenue between 3rd and 15th Streets, NW. (7509)
2. Preliminary and final site and building plans for the George P. Shultz National Foreign Affairs Training Center Perimeter Security Upgrade, 4000 Arlington Boulevard, Arlington, Virginia. (8346)

The Chair approved one item under authority delegated by the Commission. The project is in Washington, DC.

1. Transfer of jurisdiction for the Anacostia Park - Reservation 343D, 1125 O Street, SE. (8348)

The Executive Director approved one item under authority delegated by the Commission. The project is in Washington, DC.

1. Report to the Zoning Commission of the District of Columbia for a Zoning Map Amendment for Property Located at Square 442, north of Rhode Island Avenue, NW and east of Gluck Court. (ZC 21-15)