

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City



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March 30, 2016

Marcel Acosta, Executive Director
National Capital Planning Commission
401 9th Street, NW
Suite 500 – North
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Mr. Acosta:

Thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the Committee of 100 on the proposed design for the FEMS Engine 22 on the Building 18 site of the former Walter Reed Army Medical Center (WRAMC). This is particularly significant because it will be the first new building on the Walter Reed campus since the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) and the first implementation of the corresponding Public Benefits Conveyance agreement between the District of Columbia and the Army.

Committee of 100 participation

Since 2005, the Committee of 100 has participated in numerous meetings on the Reuse Plan and the Small Area Plan; testified on the Small Area Plan before the City Council and, later, on the Walter Reed Text and Map amendments before the DC Zoning Commission. We participated as a consulting party on the draft Programmatic Agreement that the Army negotiated with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and the DC Historic Preservation Office under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. We testified in support of designating the entire campus of the former WRAMC a historic district. We attended the December 2014 Wilson Building ceremony in which the Army deeded Building 18 to the District of Columbia and participated in several community and neighborhood meetings on the design for Engine 22.

Context of the neighborhood

The Committee of 100 welcomes the impending move of Engine 22 to the Building 18 site of WRAMC. The site is directly across the street from Buildings 8 and 9, the stately officers' residences on the main campus. Just across Butternut Street from Building 9 is another historic building, Number 12, the Provost Marshall House which is within plain sight of both the front and side of the Engine 22 site. Next door to the site is the Normandie, a prototypical 1930s Washington apartment building designed by George T. Santmyers, one of our city's most prominent architects of the first half of the twentieth century. Another Santmyers apartment building, the Dahlia (1928), is one block north of the site. In addition, there are, in close proximity, the attached houses by the creative

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developer/architect team of Wardman and Mesrobian. This cohesive, pre-World War II residential area is one that neighbors would like to see included in the Takoma Park (DC) Historic District. The fire house site, amidst a restrained residential district, demands a new design of some restraint.

Most recent design

The most recent design for the firehouse shows a prominent, translucent glass overhang on the second story of the firehouse, obtrusively extending beyond the Georgia Avenue and Butternut Street facades. While we acknowledge the improvement with the application of the solar control panels on the front, we continue to state that the glass overhang is still quite aggressive and particularly inappropriate for its residential location. The monumental massing of the overhang is unbefitting its context and unnecessary for distinguishing the building. It is already assured its own identity with the fire-engine red doors on Georgia Avenue and the welcoming, translucent glass “curtain” on the Butternut Street side that beckons neighbors into the community room just inside.

Historic criteria for fine firehouse architecture

We note the following observation in the DC Historic Preservation Office’s January 2011 staff recommendation for landmark designation of the 1897 Engine 22, as well as four others: “... each was designed to fit its site and suit its neighborhood architecturally.”

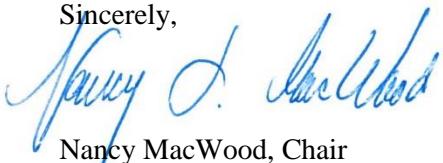
The current Engine Company 22 is Washington’s oldest municipal firehouse in continuous operation. Such important institutional history, coupled with the unique history of its new location, merit a fitting design.

Committee of 100 request

While the Committee of 100 appreciates the architect’s desire to make a statement with this firehouse, we believe that can best be accomplished by bringing down the scale of the building with more articulation of the massing and more detailing. The apartment buildings by Santmyers are excellent examples of manipulation of massing, as well as simple detailing that provide interest to the buildings while still being restrained. We are not suggesting that the firehouse should mimic the proximate apartment buildings nor replicate the historic fire houses but only that its design should take clues from the successful buildings that constitute a desirable neighborhood of nearly a century. This would, as well, help set the tone for future development that will follow across the street on the main campus of Walter Reed.

The Committee of 100 is looking forward to a more appropriate design.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Nancy D. MacWood".

Nancy MacWood, Chair