

Committee of 100 on the Federal City

Comments and Recommendations on

The CapitalSpace Draft Plan:

*Ideas to Achieve the Full Potential of
Washington's Parks and Open Space*

December 10, 2009

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City has for more than eight decades advocated for responsible planning and land use in Washington, D.C. Our work is guided by the values inherited from the L'Enfant Plan and McMillan Commission, while responding to the special challenges of 21st century development. The Committee of 100 thanks CapitalSpace for the opportunity to comment on its Draft Plan for *Ideas to Achieve the Full Potential of Washington's Parks and Open Space*. We look forward to future revisions.

We have several Overall Recommendations (listed below) for strengthening the Plan and improving its implementation. Each of these recommendations is discussed in more detail in the following pages. These are followed by Specific Recommendations on various sections of the Draft Plan. We also have a number of General Comments.

Overall Recommendations

1. Add a seventh “Big Idea” to acquire land parcels of all sizes for new parks and public open space, particularly in those parts of the city identified as underserved or lacking such amenities.
2. Add an eighth “Big Idea” to develop interlocking webs of trails and greenways through and among city neighborhoods, connecting into the larger region, thereby creating a unified, walkable/bikeable city. The partially completed Anacostia Riverwalk is a prominent example of this; creating a “green necklace” connecting the Fort Circle Parks is another.
3. Address the “Four Big Challenges” for Washington’s parks system: (a) Operation and Management; (b) Access, Distribution and Capacity; (c) Resource Allocation and (d) Funding.
4. Establish a permanent Parks and Open Space Commission---a “CapitalSpace” Commission---comprised of appropriate District and Federal representatives with authority to develop, implement and manage a unified parks system in the District of Columbia.

Specific Recommendations

- (*Planning Concepts, p.5*) Emphasize and re-emphasize the “Planning Concepts” throughout the various sections of the Plan so that their role as the conceptual framework for the Plan’s proposals is absolutely clear.
- (*Planning Concepts, p.5*) Consider re-naming the “Planning Concepts” something on the order of “Guiding Principles” to make clear their purpose and importance in steering the Big Ideas action agenda.
- (*Planning Concepts, p.5*) Tie the “Big Ideas” back to the overarching Planning Concepts explicitly and repeatedly throughout the Plan’s descriptions; for example,

alongside each Big Idea, display the icons for all of the Planning Concepts that the Idea furthers.

- (*Planning Concepts, p.5*) Explain how the Plan is related to, and furthers the policies of, other recent planning documents such as the current District and Federal Comprehensive Plans.
- (*Taking Action, pp.8-9*) Eliminate this section from this place in the Plan because the summaries of recommended actions are too general to be of meaningful use; instead, outline, expand and explain recommended actions in much greater depth as part of “Moving the Plan Forward” section.
- (*Challenges and Opportunities, pp.21-31*) Remove “Natural Resources” and “Historic and Cultural Resources” from this section and address them separately as “Unique Assets”; focus more closely on the Challenges (see Overall Recommendation 3).
- (*Challenges and Opportunities, pp.21-31*) Acknowledge two additional administrative and policy areas that represent both challenges to and opportunities for the Washington parks system: “Resource Allocation” and “Funding”.
- (*Big Ideas, pp.32-95*) Introduce a final section at the end of each Big Idea that provides *specific* next steps in order of priority, identifies potential funding sources and names partnership opportunities with community organizations.
- (*Moving the Plan Forward, pp.97-99*) Provide a comprehensive roadmap for how each “Big Idea” will be accomplished, including inter-agency coordination and implementation mechanisms, funding resources, budgets, incremental goals, pilot projects, project prioritization and timelines for completion.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Planning Concepts (p.5)

Upon review, the Committee of 100 finds that the “Planning Concepts” underpinning proposed actions are the *really* Big Ideas in this Plan and suggests they be given more prominence. These overarching principles constitute the heart of the Plan: they are the indispensable elements necessary to transform Washington’s parks and open spaces into a national and international model for the 21st century. As noted above, these “Planning Concepts” might more aptly be called “Guiding Principles” or “Vision Principles,” yet they are condensed to a single page at the beginning of the document and are largely ignored thereafter.

We believe the Plan would be strengthened by explaining in more detail how the Planning Concepts were developed, why they are important and in what way(s) they build upon Washington’s historic park plans. In addition, we recommend that the Plan explain how the Planning Concepts relate to the current Federal and District elements of the Comprehensive Plan. The absence of articulated links to major planning documents may give rise to the impression of piecemeal planning, and undermine the credibility of both the Comprehensive Plan and the CapitalSpace Draft Plan.

In a similar vein, we suggest that the Plan show plainly the relationship and mutuality between the Planning Concepts and Big Ideas. This can be done by integrating the Planning Concepts throughout the document, in a way that demonstrates how the Big Ideas implement the Planning Concepts. One tool for accomplishing this might be to display the relevant Planning Concept icon(s) alongside each Big Idea that implements the Concept.

Taking Action (pp.8-9)

The Committee of 100 suggests eliminating this section of the Plan entirely. The proposed actions are worded too generally to provide any concrete idea of what might realistically be done over the next several years or how it will be accomplished. Further, with the exception of the actions relating to the Fort Circle Parks, the recommended actions are not clearly tied to specific Big Ideas or Planning Concepts. This weakens the Plan’s ability to demonstrate how the proposed actions implement the Plan’s vision of “a beautiful, high-quality and unified park system.”

The end of this section briefly lists “additional opportunities for coordination” among the CapitalSpace partners. This list identifies critical points that deserve focused attention in the Plan. The points, which are integral to achieving the Plan’s Vision, unfortunately are not addressed in any depth elsewhere in the Plan.

We recommend moving the list of points, together with the more detailed explication of actions and next steps to the “Moving the Plan Forward” section.

The Big Ideas

The Committee of 100 generally supports the Six Big Ideas. As noted above, we feel strongly that two more Big Ideas should be added to the list—land acquisition and linking greenways—in order to achieve more fully the stated Planning Concepts. See Overall Recommendations 1 and 2. Our biggest concern is how the Six Big Ideas work themselves will be realized at the Federal and District levels. At a minimum we recommend providing a final section at the end of each Big Idea that provides *specific* next steps in order of priority, and identifies potential funding sources and partnership opportunities with community organizations.

Moving the Plan Forward (pp.97-99)

The work of bringing the City’s parks system into the 21st century will unfold over many years. Therefore, the CapitalSpace Plan should provide guidance for the short-term and the long horizon in mind. It should illuminate the big-picture needs and goals as well as the gritty details of how to accomplish them. The Committee of 100 would like to see a parks plan that can survive from one administration to the next.

The Plan names, almost as asides, various planning tools, operating mechanisms, and next steps, such as: coordination among CapitalSpace partners to provide public information on park and open space resources and recreational opportunities; maintenance contracts; capital budget programming; new improvements and programming where public and private investment is already taking place; and fundraising and partnerships with individuals, businesses and organizations. (p.9) These topics should be addressed in depth as part of the “Moving the Plan Forward” section.

Generally, the action elements of the Plan sound too much like a catalog of good intentions. While the inter-agency coordination on the development of the Plan itself is highly commendable and encouraging, the Committee of 100 is concerned that long-run efforts at reform and implementation could be stymied by resource and management issues. In our view, the Plan needs a comprehensive roadmap for how each “Big Idea” will be accomplished, including inter-agency coordination and implementation mechanisms, funding resources, budgets, incremental goals, pilot projects, project prioritization and timelines for completion. The Committee of 100 also strongly supports the establishment of a permanent parks planning commission, as outlined in Overall Recommendation 4.

OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Add a Seventh “Big Idea”: New Parks

One Planning Concept, “Expand Park System Capacity,” is addressed only partially through the existing Big Ideas. While some Big Ideas suggest ways to enhance and activate existing spaces, none addresses head-on how to satisfy the growing need for additional parks and open space throughout the District, particularly in underserved areas.

Population growth, development pressures and other demands on land use all mean that now is the time to add to the inventory of green space by enlarging existing parks, creating new parks and protecting against excessive encroachment into historic Federal and District open space. New or enlarged parks should be integral to all neighborhood plans

and incorporated into project development plans and government RFPs to the greatest extent possible. For emerging, re-developing and underserved areas of the city, these considerations should be given the highest priority. We include the following locations as examples of places where it would be appropriate to secure or re-open land to public use:

- (1) Fort Slemmer and other Civil War era sites. These should be reincorporated into the public Fort Circle Parks system;
- (2) The Western edge of the Armed Forces Retirement Home, identified in the AFRH Master Plan as zones B & C;
- (3) McMillan Reservoir and Filtration Field;
- (4) Walter Reed Medical Center grounds;
- (5) St. Elizabeth's Hospital grounds.

2. Add an Eighth “Big Idea”: Webs of Trails and Greenways

The Planning Concepts call for “[w]eav[ing] Greenway[s] through Neighborhoods” and “[l]ink[ing] the City with Green Corridors,” but these guiding principles are addressed only indirectly in the Big Ideas. The concepts of linkage and pathways are the glue binding the Plan’s elements into a unified whole. Distant views, viewsheds and the connecting visual elements played key roles in the L’Enfant and McMillan Plans that shape Washington. Given this history, the development of trails and greenways deserves a richer and fuller exposition. Beyond Washington’s unique history, the concepts of linkage and walkable greenways are at the forefront of the modern urban parks movement. We believe these commendable Planning Concepts should be given life in an enumerated “Big Idea” with its own set of recommended actions that can be tracked, planned for, funded and built.

3. Four Major Challenges to the Washington Parks System

Challenges and Opportunities (pp.21-31)

The “Challenges and Opportunities” section should focus on the issues that present obstacles to the successful implementation of the Plan. To that end, we suggest moving the discussions of Natural Resources and Historic and Cultural Resources elsewhere. They might best be treated under a separate “Unique Assets” section.

That Plan identifies “Ownership and Management” and “Access, Distribution and Capacity” as challenges. We would add two more: Resource Allocation and Funding. As we proposed for the Planning Concepts, we would like to see each Challenge fully explained and analyzed. The Challenges are potentially significant barriers to realizing an exemplary parks system in Washington DC. Handled properly, however, they can become opportunities for innovation.

Optimally, each Challenge should be clearly and explicitly tied to one or more Big Ideas; each Big Idea should state what Ownership/Management challenges it presents and how they will be addressed; what the Resources Allocation challenges are and how they might be met; what the Funding issues are; and, where applicable, how a Big Idea helps to alleviate the challenge of Access, Distribution and Capacity. To improve the readability of the Plan, icons might be used to symbolize each issue and applied throughout the Plan to show which Big Ideas are subject to them.

Resource Allocation is particularly important given the conflicting views on the appropriate uses of government-owned properties in Washington. Reflecting the inherent tension between the District’s local and federal roles, citizens often feel misunderstood at best—and shunted aside at worst—when decisions are made about the public use of public open space.

Finally, as described in our Overall Recommendation 4, the Committee of 100 believes that the best means for addressing the challenges to Washington’s parks system is to create a permanent “CapitalSpace” Commission.

4. Create a Permanent “CapitalSpace” Commission

We commend the work of the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC), the National Parks Service (NPS), the District of Columbia’s Office of Planning (DCOP) and other DC agencies that have been involved in developing and preparing the CapitalSpace Plan. Sustained, coordinated planning and implementation actions among these agencies are critical for the acquisition, development and long-term maintenance of the parks and open spaces in the nation’s Capital. The Draft Plan is an admirable effort at coordinating park and recreation management and planning where there has been little effective coordination in the past. It presents useful information, and it does a good job of reflecting an official consensus on issues where that consensus is clear. However, the vague “commit[ment] to continued coordination” is not enough. There needs to be a formalized

structure of some kind with a regular meeting schedule that includes interested partners and stakeholders.

The Committee asks the participant agencies to consider creating a unified management and policy body to coordinate the operations and the future growth of parks and recreation spaces in the city, regardless of jurisdiction—a 21st Century consortium of District and Federal planning and operating agencies, with citizen participation. We envision a structure that facilitates cooperative action without encroaching on statutory bounds of authority. A comprehensive approach is the most reasonable way to address three of the principal challenges facing Washington parks: Ownership and Management, Resource Allocation and Funding. We believe a permanent “CapitalSpace” Commission will have a strong enough voice to advocate successfully for public parkland in the face of conflicting land use pressures. The absence of effective parks advocacy is being felt at, for instance, the AFRH, St. Elizabeth’s and Walter Reed.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment on this ambitious and far-reaching initiative. We look forward to its further development.

Respectfully submitted,

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