

# The Committee of 100 on the Federal City



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**Founded 1923**

October 24, 2016

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Nancy J. MacWood

Gay Vietzke, Superintendent  
National Mall and Memorial Parks  
National Capital Region  
1100 Ohio Drive, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20014

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SUBJECT: Pershing Park/World War I Memorial Design

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Dear Superintendent Vietzke,

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City (Committee of 100), founded in 1923, is the District of Columbia's oldest citizen planning organization. We are pleased to provide these comments on the design of the World War I Memorial which is proposed to be located in Pershing Park at 14<sup>th</sup> Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, NW. These comments are based on the design presentation at the Consulting Parties meeting on Wednesday, September 21, 2016, other materials that are now posted on the National Park Service PEPC website, and site visits by Committee of 100 members to evaluate the revised design.

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City has long been concerned with protecting and enhancing, in our time, the various elements of the L'Enfant Plan (1791-92) and the planning and design work of the McMillan Commission (1901-02). Both of these plans have been important in shaping the "Monumental Core" of Washington, D.C. Pershing Park has an important location in the Monumental Core in the western portion of the Pennsylvania Avenue area, just east of the White House complex and President's Park South.

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The Committee of 100 has a strong interest in the continuing revitalization of Pennsylvania Avenue and adjacent areas between the Capitol and the White House. As you know, the National Capital Planning Commission, the National Park Service, and the General Services Administration, along with other federal and District agencies and local and national organizations, are now in the first phases of the Pennsylvania Avenue Initiative program. The "Cultural Landscape

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Inventory: Pennsylvania Avenue, NW-White House to the Capitol” (May 10, 2016), prepared by the National Park Service, provides background information for that work.

### Background

The site called Pershing Park was designed and constructed by the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation in the late 1970s, with the General John J. Pershing Memorial in the southeast corner of the park. Most of the park has continued to serve an “urban park” function, though affected by the problems which caused terminating the skating rink/outdoor plaza and the concession stand. Unfortunately, over approximately the past decade, there has been significant deterioration of some parts of the Pershing Park landscape, apparently due to lack of funding.

Members of the Committee of 100 have participated in the discussions of a proposed World War I Memorial in Pershing Park for the past several years, beginning with the EA Scoping Meeting on May 20, 2015, convened by the National Park Service and the World War I Centennial Commission. The Committee of 100 outlined preliminary concerns in a May 27, 2015 letter to the National Park Service. We noted our concerns that the important “urban park” functions of Pershing Park not be overwhelmed by the design of the World War I Memorial.

The Committee of 100 continued to track the design competition process through the summer and fall of 2015 and the selection of five potential final designs from the hundreds of designs that had been submitted. The Committee of 100 was relieved to see the selection of the “Weight of Sacrifice” as the winning design in early 2016. Of the five final designs, the “Weight of Sacrifice” seemed to have the least negative impact on the “urban park” functions of Pershing Park. Although that design had issues, it seemed to have the most potential for refinement to reduce adverse impacts. We note that the design refinement process continued for some eight months (January-September 2016) with no public information or participation.

### The Framework for Design of the World War I Memorial

The Congressional legislation for the World War I Memorial (Public Law 113-291, December 19, 2014) states “The Commission may *enhance* the General Pershing Commemorative Work by constructing on the land designated by paragraph (1) as a World War I Memorial appropriate sculptural and other commemorative elements, including landscaping, to further honor the service of members of the United States Armed Forces in World War I” (emphasis added). It is also useful to note that in your (Superintendent Gay Vietzke) January 4, 2016 letter to the Competition Jury, you said that “In advance of selecting a designer for the World War I Memorial, the National Park Service (NPS) would like to reiterate our desire to enhance the existing park to accommodate a new memorial, while retaining the signature elements of the park.” Subsequently, the National Park Service issued a formal Final

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Determination of Eligibility finding Pershing Park eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, citing a number of elements that meet various criteria.

The revised proposed design for the World War I Memorial in Pershing Park that was presented at the Section 106 Consulting Parties Meeting on September 21, 2016 is encouraging in some respects, but also has many problems. The design has been modified and simplified and some new features have been added, such as the water feature (a water scrim) in front of the Memorial Wall. These are changes since the Jury selected this general design in January 2016.

Committee of 100 members have reviewed the presentation that was shown at the September 21 meeting (presentation now on line) and have revisited Pershing Park with the presentation materials in order to try to fully understand the impact of the design.

#### Achieving a Simple Memorial

I want to let you know that there is strong sentiment in the Committee of 100, as in other reviewing organizations, to retain the historic design of Pershing Park, restore most features of the original design, and to commemorate World War I by improvements/revisions/additions to the Pershing statue area at the southeast corner of the park. That would be a simple and appropriate memorial.

#### Comments on the Proposed Design

However, we also want to address the revised design. In terms of the refined proposal presented at the September 21, 2016 Consulting Parties Meeting, we were encouraged in some respects but still have a number of concerns, questions and suggestions. We also note that the presentation materials could have been, and should have been, much clearer about the changes being proposed and how the proposed changes would affect the existing park design. For example, the “Topographic Enhancement” illustration in the presentation says “earthen berms softened to increase visibility into park on the south, west and east sides”. The word “softened” seems somewhat misleading when the site plan shows changes of one to more than four feet reductions. Such significant changes would have a very adverse effect on the original design of the park, now in place, and add significant costs to creating the World War I Memorial in Pershing Park.

In general, we believe that many of the important elements of the original M. Paul Friedberg and Oehme, van Sweden & Associates design work should be maintained, and restored where deterioration has occurred. With this overall concept in mind, we suggest a modified design, which would remove the Pavilion and somewhat raise the level of the ground where the existing lowered area (where the previous water feature was located) to provide a new central grass area and water feature (a scrim water feature) in front of the new Memorial Wall at the west end of the park. Such an approach would retain many of

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the features of the proposed revised design, while not destroying so much of the features of the original park design.

The location of the Memorial Wall as now proposed would require the removal of the original fountain structure and removal of the long row of “steps” at the west end of the park. The design of the Memorial Wall in the presentation is in very conceptual terms, with refined designs to come in the future. We suggest a modification of the revised design that has been proposed, in order to retain more of the landscape features of the original park design. It may be possible to retain the existing fountain as part of the Memorial Wall.

We also suggest that there should be an improved visual connection between the Memorial Wall area on the west side of the park and the existing General John J. Pershing statue and walls at the southeast corner of Pershing Park. The revised design proposes that the visual and symbolic connection be made by a walkway leading west from the Pershing statue to the south side of the Memorial Wall. However, this connection seems somewhat limited and requires major revision of the original Pershing Park design (removing or lowering berms and steps, etc). We suggest that it would be more appropriate to open up a broader visual connection, perhaps with some modification to the design of the central grass panel. The visual and symbolic connection between the Pershing statue area at the southeast corner of the park and the central grass area and Memorial Wall could be a very important feature in telling the story of American involvement in World War I.

#### Improving the Pershing Statue Area

We have some concerns with the existing Pershing statue area which consists of the Pershing statue and two walls at right angles. However, it is not clear what is to be done, if anything, with the two walls. This should be an important area for introducing park visitors to key reasons and events in the American involvement in World War I. However, the maps and description (etched in stone on the south wall) are very difficult to read and understand. As indicated in the presentation, “inscriptions on walls lack legibility”. We suggest that the World War I Centennial Commission, and the design team for the new design, need to give more attention to how this important entry point to the park, and the message which is to be conveyed, can be improved. Perhaps additional walls or sculpture could be added in this area.

#### Importance of the Western Portion of Pershing Park

We note that the design work does not seem to give much attention to the western portion of Pershing Park. This is the raised area west of the Memorial Wall, bordered by 15<sup>th</sup> Street on the west. Visitors in this area would be able to stand next to the top of the wall and look east over Pershing Park. We believe they should be able to look east and see the Pershing statue area at the southeast corner of the park. This area west of the Memorial Wall has a view of the Washington Monument and visual connections to the

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White House grounds, the Treasury Building, President's Park South, and the Willard Hotel and W Hotel on the north side of Pennsylvania Avenue. There is an at grade entrance into Pershing Park at the northeast corner. We suggest study of a ramp from this location down to the lower level of the Park.

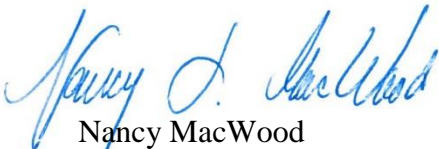
We have several concerns about proposed changes in landscaping. Lowering the berms will alter the Park's design and destroy mature trees. It would be useful to see the public safety data that is supposedly a reason for this proposed change. Concerning trees in boxes, the crape myrtles appear to be healthy. It would also be useful to clarify the proposal to add additional street trees on the north side of the Park.

In summary, we suggest further revisions that would retain as much of the original park design as possible, while incorporating new features such as the central grass panel, the water feature, and the Memorial Wall. We believe a better visual connection between the west side of the park and the Pershing statue area is needed. Finally, we believe improvements of some kind to the Pershing statue area (the walls adjacent to the statue) are needed. Further work on the Memorial Wall design is needed.

This stage of design review includes comments by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, the National Capital Planning Commission, the District Government and comments by many civic and design organizations. Clearly, some further revisions are needed. We strongly request that the next stage of the design be clearer on what is being proposed, especially any modifications to the original park design.

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City appreciates the opportunity to make these comments. We hope further design refinements can be made in the next stages of review of the Pershing Park/World War I Memorial that will make the World War I Memorial more compatible with the urban park character of Pershing Park and, at the same time will provide an appropriate statement about American involvement in World War I.

Respectfully submitted,



Nancy MacWood  
Chair

cc: Marcel Acosta, Executive Director  
National Capital Planning Commission

Thomas Luebke, Secretary  
U.S. Commission of Fine Arts

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