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**Testimony on the Final Draft Plan Report,
*Reimagining Washington's Monumental Core: A Framework Plan for
Connecting New Destinations with the National Mall,***

**before the
National Capital Planning Commission
April 2, 2009**

**John Fondersmith, AICP, Representing
The Committee of 100 on the Federal City**

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City is pleased to provide comments on the Draft Final Report, *Reimagining Washington's Monumental Core: A Framework Plan for Connecting New Destinations with the National Mall*. 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) and the planning work of the McMillan Commission (1901-1902). The proposed *National Capital Framework Plan* is important in protecting and enhancing Washington's Monumental Core and improving connections with adjacent areas. For simplicity, in the following comments we refer to the Final Draft Report under consideration as the *Framework Plan* and to our organization as the "Committee".

The *Draft Framework Plan* was released on July 10, 2008 for a 90-day public review period. The Committee of 100 on the Federal City submitted comments dated October 8, 2008. We are pleased that some of our comments seem to be noted in the *Final Draft Framework Plan*.

In summary, our comments deal with the following:

- A note on the four main planning efforts for Central Washington and the need for continue coordination;
- Comments on the four main areas of the *Framework Plan*;
- A comment on the key role of the National Mall Plan, the center of the *Framework Plan*; and
- Suggested next steps.

COORDINATED CENTRAL WASHINGTON PLANNING

The Committee commends the National Capital Planning Commission and the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts for working together to prepare the *Framework Plan*. This proposed plan builds on previous planning work by

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the National Capital Planning Commission, *Extending the Legacy: Planning America's Capital for the 21st Century* (1997). The *Framework Plan* is a key part of a number of recent and current planning efforts for Central Washington (essentially the area of the L'Enfant Plan area and some adjoining areas). The brochure, *Planning Together for Central Washington* (published in 2008 by NCPC), reflects the current efforts of four federal agencies (NCPC, CFA, NPS and AOC) and the District government (Office of Planning, etc.) on four significant planning programs that affect Central Washington. In addition to the *Framework Plan*, these include the *Center City Action Agenda*, the *National Mall Plan* and the *Capitol Complex Master Plan*.

These four major plans, and other smaller or more narrowly focused planning efforts, have proceeded on somewhat different time lines. It appears that there is a high level of internal consultation and coordination among federal, regional and District agencies, and other organizations, on these plans. **The coordination among various planning agencies is very commendable.** However, different time lines make it difficult for policy makers, the public, and concerned organizations, such as the Committee, to grasp how these plans are supposed to fit together and to track their implementation.

The Committee believes that coordination among different agencies needs to continue. We believe the *Final Draft Framework Plan*, which is now before you for review and action, is essentially ready to move forward (with appropriate refinements and editorial revisions). **When all the various key planning programs are completed, some kind of overview publication should be prepared to more clearly indicate how the various plans fit together and are to be implemented.** Without such a unified vision, we risk public confusion and perhaps piecemeal development.

EVALUATING THE NATIONAL CAPITAL FRAMEWORK PLAN

The Framework Plan deals primarily with four main areas that are adjacent to and frame **The National Mall** (hence the term, *Framework Plan*). Two of the areas (**Northwest Rectangle** and **Federal Triangle**) are north of the National Mall and the other two areas (**Southwest Rectangle** and **Potomac Park**) are south of the National Mall.

A number of proposed actions in the *Framework Plan* address past planning and development actions that are now seen as mistakes, or at least undesirable, in progressing toward the Central Washington of the future. Most of these "mistakes" date from the last 50-60 years, after World War II, when concepts of freeways, urban renewal superblocks and massive buildings combined to create an urban landscape that is often unfriendly, sometimes unsafe, and now often considered unattractive by current standards. Some of the problems date back further, when concepts of monumentality led to a disconnect between the Monumental Core and its adjacent areas. Many of these problems have been recognized for many years. Improved links to the Kennedy Center is a clear example. Various solutions have been advanced from time-to-time, though not outlined in a comprehensive approach. **NCPC and CFA deserve credit for working to address these problems in this overall approach.**

The *Framework Plan* is presented in somewhat general terms and is indicated as a thirty-year plan. Achieving the proposed results will take at least that long, probably extending more than thirty years, perhaps to 2050 or even longer for some plan elements. Overall cost will be hundreds of millions of dollars, involving both public and private funds. However, if these problems are to be addressed, and new opportunities realized, it is necessary to lay out a plan and begin moving in new directions. The Committee believes it is especially important not to lock in old mistakes, but to outline new frameworks in which desired change can unfold over time.

After adoption of the *Framework Plan*, there will be a need for more detailed study and evaluation of different plan elements. The Action Agenda section of the *Framework Plan* (pages 75-84) indicates a wide range of anticipated studies and actions. In addition, new implementing mechanisms will be necessary. The *Framework Plan* suggests some approaches, including a federal development corporation (page 83). The need for effective implementation measures should be emphasized, as the plan is refined. As noted, the former Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation (PADC) is a possible model. At the same time, implementation measures need to recognize the planning and development roles of the District government.

COMMENTS ON THE FRAMEWORK AREAS

These comments of the Committee of 100 on the Federal City are intended to address key issues and to encourage some refinements as the *Framework Plan* moves forward. In reviewing each area, we asked some overall questions:

- Is the overall direction correct;
- Is the solution worth the effort;
- Is the solution ambitious enough; and
- Are there issues or opportunities not addressed?

More detailed comments on the four framework areas are outlined below in the order of these areas in the *Final Draft Framework Plan*. In addition, we have raised some questions relating to the *National Mall Plan*, though that planning work is still underway.

Southwest Rectangle

The Southwest Rectangle portion of the plan is very important and also very difficult because of the existing development pattern. The timing of some decisions is critical since planning for the rebuilding and revitalization of the Southwest Waterfront and adjacent developments is taking place at the present time and some development is underway (Waterside Mall, Arena Stage, etc.). Coordinated planning is essential. We want to note that *Northwest Rectangle* and *Federal Triangle* are names that have been used for many years. *Southwest Rectangle* is a new name, apparently appearing first in this *Framework Plan*. We urge adoption of a more dynamic name.

The problems with the development pattern of the Southwest Rectangle derive in large part from the railroad tracks that divide the area, dating from design and location decisions made in the 19th

and early 20th centuries. Urban renewal plans in the early 1950s attempted to address this problem, in part, by having 10th Street bridge the railroad tracks. The subsequent monumental grouping of somewhat sterile buildings along 10th Street reflects the architecture and urban design thinking of the time and has not provided the animated area or attractive link to the waterfront that was originally envisioned.

The *Framework Plan* calls for rebuilding 10th Street as a narrower, mixed-use spine. Removal of the Forrestal Building would open the view to the Smithsonian Castle from along 10th Street. On the south, the Banneker Overlook would be rebuilt to provide a link to the revitalized Southwest Waterfront and a site for a major new cultural institution. Mixed use buildings, including ground floor retail, would extend along the 10th Street Mall in a compact pattern. Adjacent blocks (squares in Washington terminology) would be rebuilt with new buildings in a more cohesive urban design and form. Maryland Avenue SW would be rebuilt to be an important urban avenue with an enhanced view of the Capitol.

The Committee believes that the general approach to restructuring and improving 10th Street and Maryland Avenue is appropriate, though presumably this will take many years. The most critical immediate need is work to achieve coordination between these proposals and the plan for the Southwest Waterfront. Redesign and reconstruction of the Banneker Overlook is crucial. One key need in this area, and in other areas of the Plan, is to deal with providing underground parking space for tour buses that are a key component of the Washington visitor industry.

The Committee would have liked to see an overall long-range solution to the railroad tracks through Southwest. Unfortunately, we have been told that such an overall approach does not appear feasible and that the revisions proposed in the *Final Draft Framework Plan* (which are very significant) are all that can be done. Still, this issue might be revisited in search of a better long-range solution.

The issue of adequate pedestrian connections between the Southwest Rectangle, the Jefferson Memorial/Tidal Basin area of the National Mall, and East Potomac Park is not fully addressed in the Framework Plan. It may be that some alternative approach, such as an elevated platform or elevated walks connecting these areas, would address this issue and could be done in less time and less cost. This problem needs more attention as the Plan is refined.

The *Framework Plan* focuses on restructuring and revitalizing the 10th Street corridor and providing an improved connection to the Southwest Waterfront. This primarily involves the area between 9th and 12th Streets SW. In the long-range, change is likely for some other buildings in the area between 12th and 14th Streets, SW and the area east of 7th Street, SW. Opportunities in these areas should be addressed in later studies.

Potomac Park

Potomac Park is reclaimed filled land that is slowly sinking, subject to flooding, and its seawalls are crumbling. The *Framework Plan* is concerned that East Potomac Park (called Potomac Park in the report) is hard and consequently underused. The collection of highway and rail bridges over the Potomac River at the west edge of Potomac Park seals off and limits access from the Jefferson Memorial and other parts of the National Mall.

The *Framework Plan* calls for increasing access to East Potomac Park via a series of new bridges from the Southwest Waterfront and a new canal through East Potomac Park to improve boat access to the Washington Channel and the much enhanced Potomac Harbor. The Plan proposes that, as the existing bridges across the Potomac River reach the end of their useful life, they be consolidated and rebuilt somewhat to the south, thereby providing more open space south and east of the Jefferson Memorial. The Metrorail line is to be placed underground in a tunnel and a new Metrorail station is proposed to provide access to the Jefferson Memorial and East Potomac Park. A festival green, a new civic open space of 25-30 acres, is proposed adjacent to the Jefferson Memorial to serve a variety of outdoor activities. The proposed improvement of Potomac Park is very complex due to transportation infrastructure changes that are necessary.

The Committee believes that the East Potomac Park proposals are imaginative. It is also clear that the bridge relocations are a long-term proposal. Accordingly, some of the related actions (the new civic space, the canal and other improvements) would also be long-term improvements. In the near term, the issues of sinking land and crumbling seawalls need attention. As more detailed studies are undertaken, the benefits to be obtained related to the cost, can be further evaluated. The new civic space could be the site for festivals and other events, though major demonstrations will likely want to continue on the National Mall.

One important issue should receive additional study in the next stage. There is a general concern that global warming will lead to sea level changes over the next 50-100 years that could have some effect on the tidewater Potomac River. If there is such an effect on the Potomac River, it could very well have some future effect on areas in the National Mall Plan, Potomac Park and the Southwest Waterfront. However, there is apparently no detailed information as yet on what this effect would be, even though this could potentially have significant impacts on some of the plans that are being outlined. We urge that special efforts be made to determine the magnitude of such potential changes.

The Washington Waterfront Walk is the eleven mile connected waterfront walk (pedestrians, bicycles) from the Georgetown Waterfront to the National Arboretum. This walk is one of the key elements that came out of the 1997 *Legacy Plan* prepared by NCPC and is related to several of the areas in the *Framework Plan* (Northwest Rectangle, National Mall, Southwest Rectangle, and Potomac Park). This waterfront walk is mentioned in the *Framework Plan* but it should have greater emphasis. The Committee believes this is one of the important elements of the new Central Washington that is being created in the 21st Century.

Northwest Rectangle

The Northwest Rectangle suffers from a pattern of monumental but separate buildings, mostly federal buildings. The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts is largely separated from adjacent areas of the city, and from the National Mall, by remnants of the old Inner Loop Freeway (Potomac Freeway). The *Framework Plan* proposes two major improvements: 1) a waterfront park linking the Kennedy Center and the National Mall, and 2) extending E Street to the Kennedy Center over the freeway. Improvements are proposed for the E Street Park Corridor and new infill sites are proposed along E Street for parks and buildings. The United States Institute of Peace Headquarters and Education Center is currently under construction at the northwest corner of Constitution Avenue and 23rd Street, NW (expected to be completed in 2010) on the southern edge of the Northwest Rectangle and adjacent to the National Mall. This building and use will help change the image and activity pattern of the area.

The Committee believes that the general approach to restructuring and improving the Northwest Rectangle is suitable. It incorporates some elements that have been discussed or proposed in the past. Additional study and refinement for the park connections between the Kennedy Center and the National Mall is needed. For the E Street connection to the Kennedy Center area, the Plan seems to embrace the Vinoly Plan of several years ago that seemed to have some limitations in terms of creating an attractive link to the Center. Various alternatives were studied after that plan was released. As more detailed planning is undertaken, the Committee recommends that additional alternatives be considered for linking the Kennedy Center with E Street and the surrounding area. For example, the design concept that was shown in the *Legacy Plan* seems to provide for a more hospitable space and access to the Kennedy Center.

The overall landscape enhancement of the E Street park corridor proposed in the Plan is commendable. Further study is needed of the proposed new structure in the E Street Park between 20th and 21st Streets. Use of the E Street corridor as an important bus transit route should receive more attention in future studies.

Additional attention should be given to the linkages and development along the north side of E Street and Virginia Avenue, providing links to private development and the campus of George Washington University (GWU). Both E Street and Virginia Avenue provide a new view and visibility for the south edge of the GWU campus. The D.C. Office of Planning would more suitably address planning for this area. The Committee is also concerned that work on linking the Kennedy Center and adjacent development consider the need to protect and preserve the adjacent low scale portion of the historic Foggy Bottom neighborhood north of Virginia Avenue.

As the plans for the Northwest Rectangle are refined, additional attention should be focused on Virginia Avenue as a corridor commemorating the history and culture of Latin America. This concept part reflects the location of the Organization of American States at Virginia Avenue and Constitution Avenue and the Pan American Health Organization at Virginia Avenue and 23rd

Street, NW. A number of commemorative memorials relating to history of Latin America are already located along Virginia Avenue. Others might be added in the future as part of the plan.

The Committee is pleased to see the discussion of public use of the Old Naval Observatory in the *Framework Plan*. The major omission in the plan for the Northwest Rectangle is the limited attention to the future of Old Naval Observatory Hill, which includes several historic buildings. This may be due to recent suggestions that this important site be used for some type of high security federal office space, a move that would mean continuing to seal off this important hilltop location from public use and access for years to come. As the plans for the Northwest Rectangle are refined, the future of Old Naval Observatory Hill should be clearly addressed in a way that will allow public use and access and relate that important hilltop site to the Kennedy Center and the National Mall.

The Federal Triangle

The Federal Triangle section of the *Framework Plan* involves the Federal Triangle complex of monumental federal buildings on the south side of Pennsylvania Avenue, the Pennsylvania Avenue corridor (street, sidewalks and public open spaces), and the public and private buildings along the north side of the Avenue. The *Framework Plan* notes the progress that has been made in rebuilding and revitalizing Pennsylvania Avenue between the Capitol and the White House, an effort that now dates back 50 years. The Plan notes remaining problems and opportunities for continuing actions to improve the urban landscape and to create new destinations and activity.

Major attention is proposed for new uses in the Old Post Office and the Old Post Office Annex in the IRS Building Courtyard. In a bold statement, the Plan considers eventual rebuilding of the FBI Building site with a new mixed-use complex of buildings, including a major new museum or cultural attraction. This is a welcome idea, though likely long-range. The Plan also discusses improvements to streetscape and public spaces, such as Freedom Plaza. The plan proposes steps to animate the Federal Triangle, including the “Federal Walk”, a system of walkways connecting the courtyards and open spaces of the Federal Triangle, intended to enhance the experience of visitors, workers and residents, and better connect the Federal Triangle and Pennsylvania Avenue to the Mall. The Plan notes a possibility for reuse of some Federal Triangle buildings, namely the north wing of the IRS Building. There may be other opportunities for reusing other Federal Triangle buildings that should be explored.

Over the next 30-40 years, there will also be rebuilding of some private buildings along the north side of Pennsylvania Avenue area. Design of these new buildings and maintaining or increasing the mix of uses, will continue to be very important. Much of this design and use guidance is more in the purview of District government. This area would benefit from principles espoused by the Office of Planning elsewhere in the city, e.g. lively streetscapes, sidewalk cafes, ground floor retail, etc. However, NCPD, CFA, NPS, and GSA have a continuing role in the former PADDC area. Continued coordination is essential.

The Committee believes that the general approach to continuing to enhance the Federal Triangle and the Pennsylvania Avenue corridor is appropriate. More detailed planning work, and ongoing coordination is needed, involving the key federal agencies, the District government and other involved groups (Downtown BID, Penn Quarter Association, etc.). Reuse of the Old Post Office and adjacent space is the most immediate need.

The Plan gives only limited attention to physical and activity connections north into Downtown. In fact, Downtown activity and development is very important to the increased “bridge” role of Pennsylvania Avenue between the Mall and Downtown. The emerging Downtown Cultural Corridor includes a number of important activities in a corridor generally bordered by E and H streets and extending from Union Station on the east to the White House Precinct on the west. As planning work for Pennsylvania Avenue and the Federal Triangle continues, the relationships with this corridor of attractions to the north should receive more attention. Planning guidance for Downtown is largely the responsibility of the D.C. Office of Planning. However, the federal government has a strong role and interest, in view of federal properties in this corridor, such as the National Building Museum, the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial, the National Portrait Gallery/Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Ford’s Theater complex and the White House Precinct.

THE KEY ROLE OF THE NATIONAL MALL PLAN

The four areas in the Plan (Southwest Rectangle, Potomac Park, Northwest Rectangle and Federal Triangle) are adjacent to and **frame** The National Mall (hence the name, *Framework Plan*). Two of them (Federal Triangle and Southwest Rectangle) also slightly abut the Capitol Complex. The National Park Service is currently preparing the *National Mall Plan* and has recently released a “Preliminary Preferred Alternative” for review. The Committee is one of a number of organizations that have been involved in the consultation process with the National Park Service on that Plan and there has been a high level of public comment. The present schedule is for a draft Plan to be completed later in 2009 and the final *National Mall Plan* to be completed in 2010. It has been noted that the continuing development of the areas in Southwest and Southeast means that the National Mall will now be more of a central location, rather than simply on the southern edge of Downtown.

Because of internal administrative boundaries, the National Park Service is not currently including the *White House and President’s Park* (the Ellipse, White House Grounds and Lafayette Park) in the *National Mall Plan*. A number of the consulting organizations, including the Committee of 100, have suggested that this area should be included in the National Mall Plan. We suggest that, for clarity, this area be noted in the Framework Plan. In addition, the *National Mall Plan* as presently outlined, is not addressing or including the plans for museums of the Smithsonian Institution, the Department of Agriculture Building, the buildings and gardens of the National Gallery of Art, or the buildings and grounds under the jurisdiction of the Architect of the Capitol adjacent to Union Square. The Committee will be expressing our views on these matters, including a visitor center and the future use of the Smithsonian Institution’s

Arts and Industries Building, in our comments on the *National Mall Plan*. While we know there has been much internal coordination among the various agencies with a role in the National Mall, the *National Mall Plan* as now being outlined does not fully address the existing and future National Mall experience. A guide to the various agencies with a role in the National Mall is needed. We note that the National Coalition to Save Our Mall has mapped the Mall's balkanized oversight structure. A larger vision of the National Mall experience that includes the museums and other elements, as well as the open space and memorials, is needed. NCPC could play this role in coordination and provide a summary planning document that would provide the public with an overall view of plans for the National Mall.

NEXT STEPS

The *Framework Plan* notes that further study and refinement will be required on most elements of the four areas in the Plan, after approval by NCPC and CFA. We have noted the need for a summary planning document when other key planning programs (the *National Mall Plan* and the *Capitol Complex Plan*) are completed and released to the public.

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City also looks forward to continuing to work with the National Capital Planning Commission and the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, and other involved planning agencies and groups, as these important plans for continued revitalization of Central Washington are refined and implemented.