

The Committee of 100

on the Federal City



March 23, 2021

Committee of 100 on the Federal City Comments on the District of Columbia Commemorative Works Program

Introduction

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City is pleased to see the work that the Office of Planning, in cooperation with others, has done on developing a local Commemorative Works Location Strategy for Washington, D.C. The amount of work that has been done is impressive and forms a significant framework for continuing work on the District of Columbia Commemorative Works Program.

We have recently learned that the Council of the District of Columbia has passed “D.C. Act 23-557. Diverse Washingtonians Commemorative Works Amendment Act of 2020” and, after going through the necessary approvals, this law was projected to become effective on March 19, 2021. The procedures outlined in this legislation appear to be somewhat different from the current information presented on the Office of Planning website on which these Committee of 100 comments are based.

The Office of Planning should provide information in the near future, after the March 25, 2021 closing date for public comments, on how this new legislation affects the current procedures and information for the District of Columbia Commemorative Works Program.

The following comments and questions are essentially policy and procedural in nature. The Committee of 100 has not tried, in this paper, to comment on the 40 proposed sites for DC Commemorative Works in the eight wards of the District, or for other potential sites. We would have liked to see more public engagement on the selection of these sites.

Make Background Information Available

It is clear that considerable background work has been done for this Commemorative Works Program. Background reports should be made available to the public and a bibliography should be provided. We assume there are at least preliminary descriptions of the 40 potential commemorative sites. There is also mention that over 1,000 potential sites were considered. This means that there are approximately 960 or more other potential sites. It would be useful to have at least a simple list of these sites with location and “type of site” indicated. The related maps, which are in the Office of Planning information material, are so small that they are unreadable. They should each be made available at page size. Is there an existing list now, even in draft form, of potential persons, events or neighborhood features that might be memorialized in a commemorative work? If so, that information should be made available.

Open Green Spaces Should Not Be Taken Over by Commemorative Works

We understand that many of the potential commemorative works sites are in some type of existing open “green space”. Proposing a memorial to be located in open green space is understandable since that is very easy to do. However, the Committee of 100 is very concerned about existing open green space being taken over by memorials with large paved areas or having them otherwise intrude on green spaces

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and their uses. Green open spaces are important as an amenity and for resilience, and retaining and increasing them is very important to the future of Washington D.C.

There may be exceptions to this policy and there may be cases where some kind of memorial would be appropriate in an open green space. In such cases the memorial should be of limited size and be positioned so that any adverse impact on the open green space is very limited.

Allow for “Reflection Time”

Once the District of Columbia Commemorative Works Program gets underway, there is the question of which person(s), movements and events should be memorialized. Persons and events from the past can be considered and reviewed fairly easily. In the case of current persons, movements and events, there should be some time for reflection on whether they should be selected for a commemorative work to be erected on public space. This might be five years, etc. And, of course, there will be exceptions but it would be good to have guidelines and review procedures in advance.

Site Selection: Match the Commemorative Work with the Appropriate Site

The process for selecting who/what is to be honored and selecting the site should be clear and open to the public. While getting the program underway is important, the Office of Planning and the Commemorative Works Committee should realize that the first applicant is not necessarily the best person or subject for commemoration at a certain site.

When designating sites for commemorative works, keen attention should be given to the appeal of the commemorative work and the corresponding site regarding resonance with community history, impact on the community, distinct visibility, accessibility and safety issues. For example, small triangular parks bordered by busy streets may be a problem, especially if the site is intended to appeal to children.

Construction and Maintenance Process

The question of who pays for the Commemorative Work is important. Is this the applicant, the District government, or some combination of the two? We must remember that a Commemorative Work is not necessarily just the “monument” itself but may also include access walks, adjacent plantings and lighting, etc.

All commemorative works will require some continuing maintenance over the years. How is this to be done and who pays the cost? It is important to establish a maintenance system which addresses a number of issues: 1) which agency/entity oversees maintenance? 2) Who is responsible for checking and reporting on the condition of a commemorative work and how frequently is this done? 3) Who performs the maintenance upkeep and who pays the cost?

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Promote and Integrate Commemorative Works with a Broader History/Knowledge of Our City

As DC Commemorative Works become more well known, and the process of selecting and erecting commemorative works moves forward, there is the question of how the commemorative works will become known to more people than just immediate neighbors. Clearly a program providing information about commemorative works, and who and what is commemorated, is needed. This effort should go beyond just the Commemorative Works Committee. Guide maps, guidebooks, on line information, tours, etc. all can provide information on the location of commemorative works and who or what is being honored. Organizations such as the DC History Center and the DC Preservation League can be helpful. Of course, at the time of ground breaking for construction of a commemorative work, and at the dedication, a broad publicity program is needed. We all have to remember that a commemorative work that only has a few visitors is not fulfilling its purpose and not helping to activate the adjacent area.

Do Not Go Overboard!

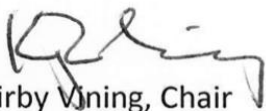
The information provided by the Office of Planning indicates that over 1,000 potential commemorative works sites were identified and that 40 of these were identified in detail, five in each of the District's eight wards. This means that about another 1,000 other sites have been identified. The Committee of 100 does not believe that our city needs 1,000 additional commemorative works. Perhaps more than 40 new commemorative works over time would be appropriate, but not too many. A commemorative work that only attracts a few visitors is not fulfilling its purpose and not helping to activate the adjacent area.

Conclusion

The Committee of 100 believes the D.C. Commemorative Works Program is important. Washington, D.C., in its role as the capital city of the United States of America, has many commemorative works and memorials. Most of these have been erected by the Federal Government and are located in the center of Washington, D.C., many in the "Monumental Core". Most of them honor national figures and events.

The District's new Commemorative Works Program will begin to give appropriate attention to persons, events and sites that are part of the history of our city, Washington, D.C. This program can be important in the continuing development of our city and enrichment of our neighborhoods. The Committee of 100 on the Federal City applauds the first steps in this program.

Sincerely,



Kirby Vining, Chair
Committee of 100 on the Federal City