

# The Committee of 100 on the Federal City



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***Founded 1923***

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**Chair**

Nancy J. MacWood

Marcel C. Acosta, AICP

**Vice-Chair**

Monte Edwards

Executive Director  
National Capital Planning Commission  
401 9<sup>th</sup> Street, NW

**Secretary**

Meg Maguire

North Lobby, Suite 500  
Washington, D.C. 20004

**Treasurer**

Carol F. Aten

SUBJECT: Pennsylvania Avenue Initiative

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Judy Chesser

Dear Mr. Acosta:

Dorothy Douglas

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Alma Gates

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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 initial comments on the Pennsylvania Avenue Initiative, the new combined effort to continue the revitalization of the Pennsylvania Avenue area. Pennsylvania Avenue is important to the nation and to our city, so its continued revitalization should be a federal priority.

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. Pennsylvania Avenue between the Capitol and the White House is a key element of the L'Enfant Plan and of the Monumental Core and adjacent areas. The Avenue has long been seen as a "bridge" between Downtown to the north and the Federal Triangle and National Mall to the south.

945 G Street, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20001

202.681.0225

[info@committeeof100.net](mailto:info@committeeof100.net)

## **The Opportunity**

It is now clear that we are in the process of a dramatic change for the center of our city. This includes the revitalization of Downtown north of Pennsylvania Avenue, a process underway for over fifty years and now nearing completion; the remaking of Pennsylvania Avenue under the initial guidance from the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation (PADC); the continued development and enhancement of the National Mall by the National Park Service, the Smithsonian Institution and

others; and new plans for the area south of the National Mall, generally extending from 1<sup>st</sup> Street to 15<sup>th</sup> Street, SW, and south to the Southwest Freeway (I-395). That large area includes the Southwest Ecodistrict Plan area, prepared by the National Capital Planning Commission; the Maryland Avenue Plan area, prepared by the D.C. Office of Planning; the site of a future memorial to President Eisenhower and the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial, now nearing completion. These projects have the potential cumulative effect of transforming the commercial and federal centers of Washington. There are, of course, many other major changes planned or underway in other areas of the Monumental Core, and in nearby commercial, institutional and residential areas.

Although some of these efforts will take some years to realize, the result can be an exciting new activity pattern for the central area of Washington. This progress is important to the residents of Washington, D.C., the region, and the nation. Pennsylvania Avenue, at the center of this action, is truly a national street, recognized across the nation and around the world

In moving forward with the Pennsylvania Avenue Initiative, NCPC and the other agencies and organizations involved should give special consideration to collecting information on various aspects of Pennsylvania Avenue and making it available in understandable form, both in text and graphics. The same is true for the proposals for future development and activation as they are prepared. We note some categories for study in the “Big and Little Ideas for the Avenue” section below.

As information and concepts are collected and developed, there should be ample opportunities for public review and comment, and for all concerned to think and learn about the past, present and future of Pennsylvania Avenue. NCPC is off to a good start with the initial public meeting on July 23, 2014, the present comment period ending September 8, 2014, and the Pennsylvania Avenue Speaker Series Event on September 19. Mary Pat Rowan attended the July 23 meeting to represent the Committee of 100. In outlining our comments, we have used the categories suggested by NCPC for commenting on the initial information presented at the July 23 meeting.

### **User Experiences along the Avenue**

The members of the Committee of 100 have experienced sections of Pennsylvania Avenue at different times, as have many residents of the Washington area, and visitors from this country and abroad. Some members of the Committee have been able to witness the many changes to the area since the *Pennsylvania Avenue Plan* was adopted in 1974, some forty years ago, and some remember the initial concepts going back to the early 1960s. As work continues, the Committee of 100 can provide more detailed responses about user experiences.

We understand that for purposes of this project, Pennsylvania Avenue includes not only the width of the Avenue but also areas to the north into Downtown and areas to the south into the Federal Triangle. We assume the work of the Pennsylvania Avenue Initiative will extend at least to the boundaries of the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation (PADC) Development Area, and to some adjacent areas. It would be useful for NCPC to clarify the area that is being considered. In the following sections we make suggestions about what NCPC should consider. In saying this, we understand that the Pennsylvania Avenue Initiative is a collaborative process involving NCPC, NPS, GSA and other federal agencies; the D.C. Office of Planning and other District agencies, the Downtown BID, the Penn Quarter Neighborhood Association and various neighborhood and citywide business and civic groups.

## **Crafting an Aspiration Statement**

We have not tried to craft a complete formal aspiration statement for Pennsylvania Avenue at this early stage. We believe it should be a special place in our city, and indeed in our country (sometimes called the “Main Street of America”). It should have some monumental aspects but it should also have a festive aspect, alive with people and activities. The Avenue should continue to have historic elements that recall the history of our city and the country. Of course it will be the place of Presidential Inaugural parades as well as other local and national events. New design ideas should be explored, but everyone involved needs to be careful not to promote design fads that may quickly be dated. Pennsylvania Avenue needs to have a timeless quality. We note that many objectives outlined in the 1974 PADC Plan are still valid.

## **Big and Little Ideas for the Avenue**

**Need for a Strong Federal and District Commitment:** A key factor in the Pennsylvania Avenue Initiative is to obtain a strong commitment by the federal government to the project. There was such a commitment in the PADC period (1972-1996) and, though key federal agencies have continued to be involved with Pennsylvania Avenue, it is clear that adequate funding for upkeep and improvement of the public spaces along Pennsylvania Avenue has been lacking. Strong federal commitment for the Pennsylvania Avenue Initiative is a key element. Fortunately, there is considerable information available, both in the previous work of PADC, the recent work of the National Park Service (*National Park Service National Historic Site Management Plan-April 2014*, released July 21, 2014), and NCPC’s studies of the Monumental Core. Strong commitment from the District government, especially the Office of Planning and DDOT, as well as other District agencies, will also be important.

**Private and Civic Involvement:** Strong commitment from the private sector, both through the Downtown Business Improvement (BID) and from property owners and businesses along the Avenue, will be necessary, as well as commitment and participation of neighborhood and citywide organizations.. The Committee of 100 is committed to strong participation in the Pennsylvania Avenue Initiative.

**The Avenue and Adjacent Open Spaces:** The design and use of the Avenue itself (sidewalks, tree planting, traffic lanes and bike paths) is especially important, as well as maintenance and use of the major open spaces (John Marshall Park, Indiana Plaza, Navy Memorial Park, Freedom Plaza and Pershing Park), and some smaller open spaces. Full maintenance of many sidewalks, including the larger landscaped areas, has been lacking in recent years. Some of the open spaces also have maintenance and design problems, especially Freedom Plaza and Pershing Park. Decisions about the future redesign of these two park areas will be especially important. We suggest that lighting for the pedestrian areas and the roadway be reviewed. Studies should consider how the future Avenue can be further activated, with more sidewalk cafes, outdoor vending, fountains, art works, orientation signing and similar measures

**Transportation:** Transportation considerations along Pennsylvania Avenue include the very important pedestrian movements, as well as the automobile, taxi, transit and bicycle movements in the main roadway (maintained by DDOT). Transportation needs and preferences need to be reviewed. North-south movement, especially pedestrian movement and transit movement, linking Downtown, the Federal Triangle and National Mall, will be increasingly important in the future.

**Planning for Development Opportunities:** NCPC will need to review development opportunities in the Pennsylvania Avenue area, with a strong emphasis on encouraging a mix of uses that will spur more activity along the Avenue. This may mean new development or it may be reusing existing buildings for existing uses, or for new uses. Today, major renovation of the Old Post Office as a luxury hotel is underway. There have been discussions of some other sites being redeveloped, and the FBI Building is the major development opportunity. NCPC should also work closely with the D.C. Office of Planning, the Downtown BID, and neighborhood groups to address development opportunities just north of the Pennsylvania Avenue Area. Despite major development, there appears to be some weakness in the retail market in adjacent areas.

In planning for Pennsylvania Avenue, NCPC will need to review the status of the PADC square guidelines, existing and proposed zoning, and historic preservation and design review to see if the present development guidelines are still appropriate, or if new or revised measures are needed. NCPC has submitted comments to the DC Zoning Commission on zoning proposals that would affect the Pennsylvania Avenue corridor and it should continue to work closely with the Office of Planning to ensure flexible planning for future uses and development in this area.

**Realizing the Potential of the FBI Building Site:** We believe major attention needs to be focused on the future development of the site of the J. Edgar Hoover Building, bounded by Pennsylvania Avenue, 9<sup>th</sup> Street, 10<sup>th</sup> Street and E Street, NW. even though redevelopment of that site will be some years in the future. At the present time, GSA is engaged in the initial steps leading to selection of a new site for a modern, secure and attractive "FBI Campus". It will take some years to design and build that campus and to move the FBI offices there

We are concerned that the present emphasis seems to be all on the FBI Campus with limited regard for the future of the J. Edgar Hoover Building site. The use of the site to reactivate that section of Pennsylvania Avenue, through good design and a mix of uses, should also be a major federal interest. The present building, with its front façade, and large moat-like setbacks on 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and E streets, has a negative effect on adjacent frontages. Special urban design of future development on this site is critical to increase activity on those streets, as well as along Pennsylvania Avenue.

**Connecting with Adjacent Areas:** Planning for Pennsylvania Avenue must consider linkages to adjacent areas, including the Federal Triangle to the south, the Capitol Grounds to the east, the sections of Downtown on to the north, and President's Park to the west. All of these areas have had considerable planning, some by NCPC, some by other federal agencies and the Architect of the Capitol, and some by the D.C. Office of Planning and the Downtown BID. All these areas have some relationship and effect on the main area of Pennsylvania Avenue.

**Historic Preservation and Historic Commemoration:** The original plans for Pennsylvania Avenue in the early 1960s called for completely rebuilding the north side of the Avenue, with a uniform building line and large open spaces. The FBI Building, completed in 1974, was the first step. Fortunately, the efforts of the District government, federal agencies, and local and national groups, led to plan revisions in 1974 that included a mix of new and old buildings. Historic buildings retained include the Willard and Washington hotels, the National Theater, the Old Post Office, the Evening Star Building, and the cluster

of buildings at Pennsylvania Avenue and Indiana Avenue, as well as other buildings in the PADC area to the north. The Pennsylvania Avenue Initiative should include a review of the condition of these buildings and should determine if further preservation actions are needed.

Additional marking of the past history of buildings and areas along the Avenue may also be needed. For example, marking the original location of Washington's original Chinatown near Pennsylvania Avenue and Fourth Street, NW (suggested in several comments at the July 23<sup>rd</sup> meeting) seems like a good example of providing more information about the national and local history of Pennsylvania Avenue.

**Activating the Avenue:** There is a good level of activity along Pennsylvania Avenue today, aided by many restaurants, retail establishments, four hotels (and the Trump International Hotel in the Old Post Office to open in 2016) and a number of apartments, as well as office space. Yet much more needs to be done to activate the Avenue with more restaurants and more hotels and residential space. Pennsylvania Avenue is already used for a number of different events, especially in Navy Memorial Park, the farmers market on 8<sup>th</sup> Street and on Freedom Plaza. However, an increased program is needed to add new events and entertainment, and to make the Avenue the place where both residents and visitors want to come for a special Washington experience.

### **The Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation**

The Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation was in existence for over 20 years (1972-1996) and over that period was responsible for major changes and improvements for Pennsylvania Avenue, changes that were almost entirely beneficial. Since then, NCPC, NPS and GSA have acted to continue the federal role in the continued revitalization of Pennsylvania Avenue. Moving forward, we believe some new organizational structure, involving the key agencies and other actors, will be needed to efficiently carry out the proposals of the Pennsylvania Avenue Initiative in coming years. Creating this enhanced organizational structure should be a key element of the Initiative studies.

### **Lessons Learned from Capital City Streets**

As has been suggested, we believe it is useful to look at the lessons of great streets in other capital cities, both in terms of what works and, as noted in the information provided, what does not work or at least would not be suitable for Pennsylvania Avenue. Lessons from other great streets in this country might also be useful. At the same time, it is necessary to recognize that these great streets are different from Pennsylvania Avenue, and not to spend too much time in making comparisons.

### **Looking Ahead for Pennsylvania Avenue**

Achieving the next stages of improving and revitalizing Pennsylvania Avenue will take time. Some efforts can begin soon but other actions will take longer. Repair and upgrading of the infrastructure of the Avenue (cleaning and replacing pavers, improving landscaping, and possibly revising some of the public spaces) will take longer and require considerable funding. New development will take longer. The single major development opportunity for Pennsylvania Avenue is, of course, the J. Edgar Hoover FBI Building site. That great opportunity must not be wasted.

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Some target date should be set for this next stage of Pennsylvania Avenue revitalization. The year 2026, now some 12 years in the future, is the 250th anniversary of American Independence. That year will be celebrated across our county with numerous events and projects. We believe that 2026 would be a good target date, while noting that we should all begin now to think about and begin to implement the continued revitalization of Pennsylvania Avenue.

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City looks forward to further discussion of the continuing revitalization of Pennsylvania Avenue as ideas and options are developed as part of the Pennsylvania Avenue Initiative. Thank you for this opportunity to make these initial comments.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Nancy J. MacWood". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "N" and "M".

Nancy MacWood  
Chair