

The Committee of 100
on the Federal City



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Founded 1923

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Chair

Stephen A. Hansen

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

Vice-Chair

Meg Maguire

Secretary

Jim Nathanson

SUBJECT: Pershing Park/World War I Memorial Design

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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 comments on the design of the World War I Memorial, which is to be located in Pershing Park at 14th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, NW. These comments are based on the design presentation at the Consulting Parties meeting on February 9, 2017 and other materials that are now posted on the National Park Service PEPC website.

In 1974 the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Plan proposed redesign of Pershing Park. In the late 1970s, M. Paul Friedberg and Partners designed Pershing Park for the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation. Construction was completed and the park opened in 1981. Oehme van Sweden & Associates redesigned some of the park planting at that time. The Pershing Memorial was constructed in the southeast corner of the park. Most of the park has continued to serve an important "urban park" function, though affected by the problems which caused terminating the skating rink/outdoor plaza and the concession stand. Unfortunately, there has been significant deterioration of the Pershing Park landscape, apparently due to lack of funding.

945 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20001
202.681.0225

info@committeeof100.net

Members of the Committee of 100 have participated in the discussions of a proposed World War I Memorial in Pershing Park, 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 the design had issues, it seemed to have the potential for refinement to reduce adverse impacts. We note that the design refinement process continued for some eight months, with no public information.

A revised proposed design for the World War I Memorial in Pershing Park was presented at the Section 106 Consulting Parties Meeting on September 21, 2016, followed by an October 2016 Concept, which proposed removing a significant amount of park fabric. The Committee of 100 outlined our concerns with the proposed design in our letter to you of October 24, 2016. Other local and national organizations also commented on the proposed design. The U.S. Commission of Fine Arts and the National Capital Planning Commission also reviewed the design and commented on it. Essentially, all these comments expressed concerns and requested design revisions to the proposal that would better respect the original park design. The National Capital Planning Commission action on November 3, 2016 was especially strong in suggesting design issues that needed more study.

Since November 2016, the World War I Centennial Commission and its consultants have been working on two alternative designs, the Pool & Plaza Concept and the Scrim & Green Concept. The World War I Centennial Commission has endorsed the Scrim & Green Concept, though we understand that the Pool & Plaza Concept was not presented to the Commission.

These two Concepts were presented at the Consulting Parties Meeting on February 9, 2017. A member of the Committee of 100 attended that meeting. At the end of the meeting, the National Park Service staff said that a two-week comment period would begin the next day, Friday, February 10 and would end on Friday, February 24. The plans presented at the meeting were posted on the National Park Service PEPC site on February 10. We do want to note that a two-week comment period is a very short time for such an important project.

Since February 10, members of the Committee of 100 have viewed the materials online, printed out the materials, and visited Pershing Park with the materials in hand to better visualize the two plans.

The two Concepts presented at the Consulting Parties Meeting on February 9 both improve over the concepts presented last September and October. However, we still have some concerns, questions and suggestions as outlined below. It is clear that significant design work, analysis and expense have gone into preparing the two revised designs. However, we want to note that it is still somewhat difficult, even standing in Pershing Park with the designs in hand, to be completely sure of what is being proposed. We hope that the National Park Service will request more clarity in the next stage of plan refinement. That would certainly improve the design review process.

Both Concepts retain the Pershing statue, walls and paving (though moving the Pershing statue eight feet to the north); eliminate the fountain and part of the western edge stairs; and eliminate the kiosk and, in its approximate location, add a flagpole (free standing or on a plinth). We summarize our understandings of the revised designs below.

Pool & Plaza Concept

This Concept preserves the views and vistas in the original park design, retains the park's orientation around a sunken plaza and pool, preserves part of the pool, and also preserves more of the park's fabric, i.e., the planting beds around the plaza and portions of the terraced seating and planters on the south side.

Scrim & Green Concept

This Concept eliminates much of the terracing and planters on the south side as shown on the February 9 report, p. 49, and raises the sunken portion of the park in order to create a level walkway linking the Pershing statue to the Memorial Wall on the west. This Concept eases pedestrian access because there are no stairs. The pool is replaced by a smaller scrim. One of the objectives of the design competition was: "Establish a memorial with weight and gravity commensurate with that of the war memorials on the Mall." (February 9 report, p. 14). The two war memorials on the National Mall with water features (World War II and Korean War) have pools, not shallow scrim. Visitors will expect a thoughtful, solemn experience at the World War I Memorial, and a pool is a key part of that experience. After further review, we are concerned that a scrim looks insubstantial. If the Scrim & Green Concept is chosen, we urge that the scrim be replaced with a pool, which would improve visitors' experience, and would be very feasible.

Both Concepts as presented at the February 9, 2017 meeting have adverse effects on land use, built features, and the water feature. The Scrim & Green Concept has an additional adverse effect on vegetation. Our October 24, 2016 letter advocated maintaining many of Friedberg's and Oehme van Sweden's design elements. We believed that a modified design raising the ground level slightly, providing a new central grass area and a scrim, might meet the goal of retaining many of the park's original design elements. However, after reviewing both Concepts, we now believe that the Pool & Plaza Concept best preserves essential elements of Pershing Park as an "urban park."

Questions

It would be helpful to have additional information on the following points:

- The Memorial Wall is longer in the Scrim & Green Concept than in the Pool & Plaza Concept. What length of wall is needed to convey the sculptural artwork and message of the Memorial? What written explanation will be provided, and where, or will the Memorial Wall simply make its own statement?
- Is it correct that the shorter walls at a right angle on the Memorial Wall in the Pool & Plaza Concept are retaining walls?
- How do the two Concepts comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act?

- Is the volume of soil in the tree boxes on Pennsylvania Avenue changed or reduced in either of the Concepts?
- Will the light pole near the Pershing statue, and perhaps other light poles, be relocated?
- The quality of the writing on the south wall in the Pershing Statue area is very difficult to read. We understand that steps will be taken to make it more legible. Can any additional information be provided on how to address this problem?

We want to raise the question, once the World War I Memorial in Pershing Park is completed, what will be done to provide visitors with an interpretation of the park design, the World War I Memorial, and indeed some additional information on World War I. Where will National Park Service rangers be located? Where is there a simple place to provide information (pamphlets, etc. or electronically) about the Pershing Park and about World War I? We suggest these questions be addressed now as part of the refinement of the park design.

We also note that the Consulting Parties process for this project raises a number of questions, aside from just the design process, which we hope the National Park Service will address. That is a matter for another time and place, but we believe it is one of the important concerns coming out of the review process for the World War I Memorial.

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City appreciates the opportunity to make these comments. We hope further design refinements can be made so that the World War I Memorial will be more compatible with the urban park character of Pershing Park.

Respectfully submitted,



Stephen A. Hansen
Chair

cc: Marcel Acosta, Executive Director -- National Capital Planning Commission
Thomas Luebke, Secretary -- U.S. Commission on Fine Arts
Eric Shaw, Director -- D.C. Office of Planning
David Maloney -- State Historic Preservation Officer for the District of Columbia
Catherine Dewey -- National Park Service
Edwin Fountain -- World War I Centennial Commission
Claire Sale -- AECOM