

**John Fondersmith, AICP
6417 Western Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20015**

May 19, 2008

Re: Comments of *The Committee of 100 on the
Federal City* on the National Mall Plan

Susan Spain, Project Executive
The National Mall Plan
National Mall and Memorial Parks
900 Ohio Drive, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20024-2000

Dear Ms. Spain:

On behalf of *The Committee of 100 on the Federal City*, I am submitting the following comments on the National Mall Plan. *The Committee of 100* is one of the consulting parties in the Section 106 process and has had a long interest in the design and use of The National Mall. These initial comments are based on the discussions at the two consulting parties meetings held on the National Mall and the Pennsylvania Avenue National Historic Park Plan (March 19 and April 16, 2008), the materials that have been distributed at those meetings, and review of the Draft Alternatives Matrix-The National Mall (April 2008).

These comments are selective and somewhat preliminary. Representatives of a number of consulting parties are meeting this week to discuss the materials and to seek to provide a unified response on the materials to the National Park Service. We request that the National Park Service accept those unified collaborative comments when presented. I note that we have not included comments on the Pennsylvania Avenue National Historic Park in this submission, since that area will be the subject of further detailed discussions at the meeting the National Park Service has scheduled for June 11, 2008. We will address relationships with the Downtown area, north of Pennsylvania Avenue at that time.

Draft Alternatives Matrix-The National Mall

We have spent considerable time reviewing the “Draft Alternatives Matrix-The National Mall” (April 2008). We have found it useful in thinking about the various choices that need to be made regarding the future development of The National Mall, but we have also found it perplexing. The Matrix focuses on making somewhat detailed choices in a large number of categories (141 major “topics or areas”, often with subchoices within the subcategories.). For each of the 141 topics or areas, the matrix provides four choices (No-Action Alternative, Alternative A-Focus on Historic Landscape and Education, Alternative B-Focus on a Welcoming Civic Space, and Alternative C-Focus on Urban Open Space, Recreation, etc.), though in many instances, two or more of the alternatives are the same. The problem we see with this approach is that the National Mall, and even many subareas, must serve different roles at different times and for different groups. Indeed, different people visiting the National Mall at the same time may very well experience the Mall in different ways, and the Mall must serve a variety of needs at the same time.

There are also a wide variety of needs in addressing the future of the Mall. There are some big issues and big ideas (and big questions) that need and deserve concentrated attention (the redesign of Union Square, the Tidal Basin redesign and connections to adjacent areas, the question of underground parking and a possible 14th Street tunnel, transportation connections and service with adjacent areas, accommodating tour buses, etc.) There are also many other design and service issues (walkway design, improvement of soils, provision of rest rooms, food service, orientation, etc.) which are also very important but which can be addressed within the overall framework, once that framework is set. The “comprehensive list” arrangement of the Alternatives Matrix may mean that some major issues and questions get lost.

Our approach is therefore to undertake further consultation with other consulting parties to see if a consensus can be reached on a least some of the many “topics or areas”. Further consultation with the National Park Service will likely be needed about the meaning of some alternatives.

The Need for Clarity

It is important that the final National Mall Plan be presented in a clear manner and that the important relationships with adjacent areas be indicated.

Time Frame: The time frame for this National Mall and the Pennsylvania Avenue National Historic Park Plan is 50 years, presumably 2010-2060, a slightly longer time frame than the period since the last major Mall Plan (1966) and about the time period for the current planning and rebuilding of Pennsylvania Avenue (beginning in the early 1960s and essentially completed with the Newseum which opened in Spring 2008). It is essential that the big ideas be stressed even though they may not be implemented for

many years. Indeed, it is likely that many of the smaller, less dramatic features of the plan will be the first to be completed.

Format of Plan: The consulting parties do not yet have an understanding of the structure and format of the final plan. It is important that the plan have an overall clarity so that Washingtonians, and all Americans across our country, can understand the big ideas of the Plan.

Area of Plan: There has been considerable discussion among the National Park Service and the consulting parties about the area covered in the plan. The current plan is limited in area by National Park Service administrative boundaries. However, it is important that overall concepts and relationships be clear. At the least, plans for adjacent areas (such as the White House Area, also planned by the National Park Service) and the Capitol Complex should be shown in an illustrative manner. Links to adjacent areas, and the plans for those areas (East Potomac Park and links to Old Naval Observatory Hill and the Kennedy Center) also will be important for the use of the National Mall and the impact of those linkages needs to be clearer and more complete than indicated thus far.

Plan Parameters: It would be useful to have some additional information available on the forces that will shape the use of the National Mall and related areas in the future, such as projections of visitation and traffic.

Role of Other Planning Programs: The Plan for the National Mall and the Pennsylvania Avenue Historic Park are part of the overall “Planning Together for Central Washington “ program being carried out by federal and District agencies. Related planning efforts are underway with draft plans to be released in the next several months (the National Capital Framework Plan, being prepared by the National Capital Planning Commission and the Commission of Fine Arts, and the Capitol Complex Master Plan being prepared by the Architect of the Capitol). The Center City Action Agenda, prepared by the D.C. Office of Planning with other District agencies and private organizations, was released in early March 2008. The National Park Service has been involved in these planning programs. However, the consulting parties have generally not seen the draft proposals that are still being developed. It is difficult to comment fully on the National Mall Plan when plans for adjacent areas are not yet clear.

In addition, the Smithsonian Institution is a key player in the activities and overall character of the National Mall and adjacent areas. Yet, except for the future site of the Museum of African American History and Culture, information on future plans of the Smithsonian are not available. There needs to be more discussion of Smithsonian plans, including the potential future use of the Arts and Industries Building.

Flooding Issue: The potential for serious flooding of some National Mall areas has been raised, a problem that could well become more serious if sea level changes related to

global warming become more pronounced over the next 50-100 years. The implications of these potential changes needs to be considered and made clearer.

Relationships and Links to Adjacent Areas

One of the most important features of The National Mall in the 21st Century will be its increased centrality with other areas of Central Washington, a condition stressed in the Center City Action Agenda. Transportation and symbolic links with these areas will be a key factor in how the National Mall operates and is perceived in the future.

The “Potomac Riverfront” section of the National Mall is especially important and has not received sufficient attention in discussions and in the Matrix (No. 28. West Potomac Park Riverfront). One of the important concepts in the NCPC Legacy Plan (1997) was the Washington Waterfront Walk (WWW), the proposal to connect various walkways to form an 11-mile waterfront walk extending from the Georgetown waterfront on the west to the National Arboretum on the east. Much of this distance involves existing federal land, much of it under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service. To the west, in Georgetown, this walk will connect to the C&O Canal towpath and the Capital Crescent Trail. To the east it will connect with trails east across the Anacostia River and along the Anacostia River to the north.

The section of the Washington Waterfront Walk in the National Mall area is especially important since it will receive heavy use by visitors as well as residents. Design of the WWW will be important because of its use by walkers, joggers and bicyclists. Multiple pathways may be necessary in some areas. Providing an easy and safe connection from the Tidal Basin area to the Southwest Waterfront will be especially important. Separate walking and biking trails are mentioned in the Matrix but the importance of this link in the overall Washington Waterfront Walk needs to be made clear.

Big Ideas

The planning documents and the Matrix suggest some “big ideas”, such as redesigning Union Square, redesigning the north side of the Tidal Basin, and improving the links between the Washington Monument Grounds and the Tidal Basin. However, the nature of these proposals are not completely clear and they need to be more clearly explained in functional and design terms.

Special Events

One of the big issues in the central part of The National Mall (between the Capitol and the Washington Monument) is how to have large special events without impairing the soil and tree conditions of the Mall. The Smithsonian’s Folklife Festival is a key example. Section 13.4 of the Matrix hints at this problem. Further discussion of this key issue is necessary.

The View to the West

One of the key issues involving the National Mall is the “view to the west” from the Capitol to beyond the Lincoln Memorial. The original design for the National Mall envisioned an uncluttered view to the west, symbolizing the future growth of the country. Unfortunately, a number of somewhat banal buildings in Virginia are visible beyond the Lincoln Memorial and mar the view west from the Capitol along the Mall. Past efforts by the federal government (NCPC) to protect this viewshed have not been fully successful. Continued protection of the western view should be part of the National Mall Plan. Hopefully at some future time it will be possible to remove some of the offensive buildings (as they wear out) and restore a more appropriate background for the National Mall. This is a matter which may be more in the purview of the National Capital Planning Commission. However, no plan for the future of The National Mall should ignore this threat to the historic character of this special place.

Pennsylvania Avenue National Historic Park

As indicated previously, we are not making any comments on the Pennsylvania Avenue National Historic Park until there has been more discussion on June 11.

Next Steps

The Committee of 100 on the Federal City will continue to participate in the Section 106 consultation process, and will work with other consulting parties to submit coordinated comments. We request the National Park Service to accept these comments.

Sincerely,

John Fondersmith, AICP

Representing *The Committee of 100*
on the Federal City

6417 Western Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20015

(202) 966-8431

john.fondersmith@verizon.net

cc: Laura M. Richards, Esq., Chair
Committee of 100 on the Federal City