

**Testimony before the House Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests & Public Lands  
on  
The Future of the National Mall  
by  
Dr. Judy Scott Feldman, President and Chair  
National Coalition to Save Our Mall  
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Good morning, Chairman Grijalva and committee members. I am Dr. Judy Scott Feldman, chair and president of the National Coalition to Save Our Mall, an independent citizens nonprofit organization founded in 2000 that works to protect and enhance the integrity of the National Mall through education and advocacy. In 2007 we created a new nonprofit, the National Mall Conservancy, inspired by New York City's Central Park Conservancy, to fill gaps in programming for the Mall's open space. With the Committee's okay, I would like to submit testimony for the record and summarize my main points.

**The Value and Limits of Current Federal and DC Government Planning**

You've heard today about serious problems on the National Mall—dead grass and crumbling walkways; flooding; sinking seawalls at the Tidal Basin; numerous proposals for new museums and memorials despite the Congressional moratorium; lack of visitor amenities and adequate transportation—and about planning efforts by the National Park Service and the National Capital Planning Commission to address these problems, as well as Congresswoman Norton's proposed legislation aimed at expanding the Mall. And you've learned that Washington, D.C., Mayor Fenty's new Center City Action Agenda envisions the National Mall as a lively urban park and the centerpiece of a revitalized “center city” stretching from Downtown to the Southwest Waterfront.

After years of trying to galvanize Mall planning, we are pleased to see so much activity by the federal government and the city. As welcome as this is, these efforts are insufficient and piecemeal.

- While the National Park Service claims sole jurisdiction for the Mall, in truth Mall management is fragmented among six agencies including the Smithsonian Institution, the Architect of the Capitol, the National Gallery of Art, the US Department of Agriculture, and DC Government (See Illustration 1).
- At the plan review level, the National Capital Planning Commission and Commission of Fine Arts try to coordinate but tend to defer to each agency's proposals.
- We've identified at least eight congressional committees with oversight, and we fear there is little communication among them (see Illustration 2).
- Some of these entities work in direct opposition; none can agree on the Mall's definition or boundaries; none has the authority to cut through the turf wars or the ad hoc development and institutional neglect that have long characterized Mall management and oversight.
- And yet, visitors don't distinguish between the property of the Park Service and the National Gallery, or a Senate or House committee. They see the National Mall as a

whole, from the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial, as an iconic landscape at the core of the American psyche.

Even with all the ongoing planning activity, we don't see the kind of visionary thinking and proposals we believe are warranted for this great symbolic landscape.

- NPS calls its plan the National Mall Plan and a “vision,” but in truth the scope is limited primarily to management concerns—trees, grass, restrooms—and only to areas under park service jurisdiction.
- NCPC's Framework Plan addresses Congress's need for sites for future museums and memorials *off* the Mall—certainly an urgent problem as new museum and memorial proposals continue to proliferate—but not the Mall itself.
- With regard to the memorial siting challenge, we were pleased to see Congresswoman Norton take a leadership role in proposing to expand the Mall, which we have long advocated. We need to tell more of the story of our country, through additional markers, memorials, self guided tours, and the like. We simply cannot meet that need on the traditional Mall, so expansion is essential. We would go further than Congresswoman Norton.
- Mall expansion needs to be about more than identifying real estate for new monuments. It goes to questions of how the Mall's value to the nation and the City of Washington as symbolic landscape and urban park can be improved and enriched. And this is a conversation we believe requires Congress to create a new, independent National Mall Commission in the tradition of the McMillan Commission a century ago, about which we will speak more in a moment.

### **DC's Center City Action Agenda Needs a Lively Urban Park**

Adding to the complexity of how we look at *The Future of the National Mall* is Mayor Fenty's new economic development action agenda, which seeks to create a new, expanded “center city” with the National Mall as the “centerpiece.” The Mall at long last could realize its full potential as a lively urban park in the heart of our nation's capital.

But DC government is confronted by a dilemma. Congress has declared the Mall a “substantially completed work of civic art” and NPS and other federal agencies are planning in ways that accept the *status quo*. DC's Center City Agenda can only succeed, however, if the Mall can be transformed into a lively urban park that serves and connects neighborhoods and commercial areas around it. The status quo won't do. The Mall has to be considered *more than* a national park such as Yellowstone. It needs to be reconceived in ways that go beyond NPS management policies, with their emphasis on preserving natural resources, in favor of a vision for a grand *urban* park created to serve people—25 million visitors annually from around the country and the world, as well as local residents and workers. In other words, the Mall cannot be “completed” if the Mall is to be part of the revitalization of the nation's capital.

Compounding the problem for the city, DC Government is effectively shut out of Mall planning. Again with the NPS's latest planning effort, its National Mall Plan, there seems a reluctance by NPS to engage the District government even as the adjacent neighborhoods,

including the area around the new ballpark, begin to attract business and new residents for whom the Mall will be their “local” park. Those of us representing citizens groups and nonprofits in NPS’s National Mall Plan consultation process are finding that the public has little opportunity to influence NPS thinking and instead is asked to react to NPS priorities (more about the NPS plan below).

## **A McMillan-type National Mall Commission**

How to get beyond the fragmented jurisdictions, conflicting priorities, and policy differences to plan the future of the entire National Mall—for the nation, DC, and the American public?

We believe that only a congressionally chartered commission of prominent Americans would be able to prepare a vision and framework plan for the Mall *as a whole*, updating the 1901-1902 McMillan Commission Plan, the last time there was a serious look at the entire Mall. The commission could work with NPS and NCPC to identify federal lands for Mall expansion; collaborate with the DC Government in reconnecting the federal and DC interests for the Mall and the city as a whole; and consult with the American public—local residents and citizens around the country—to find ways to make the National Mall newly relevant for all of us in coming years and decades.

## **The Coalition and Conservancy and a Public Voice**

### **A Citizens’ Vision for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Mall**

For several years now, the Coalition has been proposing the exciting possibilities for a 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Mall vision. Because we are an independent citizens group, and not bound by Congressional or DC policies and priorities, we have been able to focus our attention exclusively on the Mall’s history, problems, and future. We call our concept a “citizens’ vision” for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Mall.

We saw that in the years since declaring the Mall “completed” in 2003, Congress has made exceptions to its own moratorium. **We realized the Mall can’t be “completed”—any more than American history will stop happening.** As new projects continue to be authorized or proposed—a Vietnam Veterans Memorial visitor center, a Museum of African American History and Culture, and most recently a Latin American Museum--and as our society continues to evolve, the call for monuments and memorials will continue to grow, and the available space will continue to shrink.

The Mall today has become “the people’s place,” the stage for our democracy. The American people feel that they own it. The Mall is a place where our history continues to unfold, where our democracy can be continually rejuvenated. It is poised as never before to become a lively destination not only for visitors from around the country and the world, but also for local residents, office workers, and businesses that are bringing new life to downtown Washington and nearby neighborhoods.

We call our concept a “citizens vision” for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Mall. It calls for a new vision that enlarges and builds upon the historic L’Enfant Plan of 1791 (what we call the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Mall) and the expanded McMillan Plan of 1901-02 (the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century Mall) and makes them newly relevant to the 21st century—the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Mall.

What could that vision entail (see Illustration 3)?

- The Mall can be expanded. Most Americans don't appreciate that the Mall originally ended at the Washington Monument, or that the Lincoln Memorial is built on landfill. A century ago, the McMillan Commission expanded the Mall with landfill, more than doubling its size to create sites for the Lincoln Memorial and huge expanses of public parkland. Today the Mall can grow again—perhaps incorporating such public land as East Potomac Park, Theodore Roosevelt Island, L'Enfant Promenade, the South Capitol Street corridor (for the most part, land identified by NCPC and NPS for future memorials and museums)—to accommodate more museums, more memorials, more civic and recreational space.

What would an expanded Mall look like? We have created a sketch of a “10-Year Vision” for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Mall that illustrates that (see Illustration 4):

- Expansion areas could be connected to the traditional Mall and the surrounding neighborhoods in a continuous loop of pedestrian, bicycle, and shuttle bus routes, including new bridges across Washington Channel, and could encompass a three-mile-long waterfront park;
- New circulation patterns could unfold along the Potomac route, starting at the Lincoln Memorial at the west and punctuated by the FDR, Jefferson, and memorials yet to come, before crossing the Washington Channel and ascending Capitol Hill along the majestic new Gateway Boulevard;
- Parking, new venues for mega events such as the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival, and new recreational space could be created beyond the Mall's traditional main vista.

We realize that our ideas are only the first step in moving toward creating a 100-year vision on the scope and scale of the historic L'Enfant and McMillan plans. The next step belongs to Congress and a 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Mall Commission.

### **The Limitations of the National Park Service's National Mall Plan**

The National Coalition to Save Our Mall is participating as a “consulting party” in the Historic Preservation Act Section 106 public consultation for the National Mall, along with several other nonprofit organizations and citizens groups. There have been a number of public meetings and listening sessions where NPS planners have presented and solicited comments.

The scope of the NPS planning effort has been a matter of some confusion and concern among “consulting parties” in the Historic Preservation Act Section 106 public meetings. It is still not clear how NPS's study area relates to the historic L'Enfant Plan and McMillan Plan. Instead, NPS focuses on planning for individual “cultural landscapes” such as the Washington Monument grounds, Union Square (the panel at the foot of the Capitol), but not for the National Mall as a unified whole based on the historic L'Enfant Plan and McMillan Plan. Nor has NPS explained adequately why critical topics such as transportation and circulation—right now a major problem for visitors and residents alike—and visitor amenities, such as good food options, are not included in the scope of study and seem to be

determined more by the needs of NPS concessionaires than by public need. Several participants in the Section 106 process have raised concerns about the lack of transparency, insufficient consultation in developing alternatives, listening sessions that revealed little about NPS thinking and intent, and the piecemeal approach to different parcels of the Mall and lack of an overall vision as a whole in the tradition of the McMillan Commission. There is concern that NPS's management priorities could set in motion changes that instead of showing the way to the future could enshrine the status quo and inhibit needed improvements.

### **Creating a Vision for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Mall**

It's easy today to throw around the words "vision" in planning. But none of the current federal and DC efforts—with their focus on natural resources, memorials, and economic development—constitute a vision for this iconic landscape. We would like to make our point about the kind of vision needed—and why only an independent commission of prominent Americans can achieve this—by looking back a hundred years to the McMillan Plan of 1901-1902, the last successful long-range plan for the Mall.

The McMillan Commissioners had a clear understanding of what our burgeoning democracy needed in its capital city at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: We needed sites for memorializing our heroes including Abraham Lincoln. We needed great public buildings in the Federal Triangle to house the growing civil service for our growing country. We needed to restore L'Enfant's vision of the Mall as the people's place, by clearing away the trees and clutter, and to tie it effectively to a system of parks and recreational places throughout the capital city. We needed to project an image in landscape, architecture, and majestic vistas of our nation as a world power and shaper of history. The Commission was blessed with land to grow into through the Corps of Engineers project to drain the marshlands along the Potomac shore, which resulted in creating hundreds of acres of new land contiguous to the original Mall.

They gave us a plan that we have grown into over the past century and that now, once again, needs renewal. We need to seize this opportunity. The possibilities for the nation, the city, and the American public are exciting.

This is not a task to be assigned to existing government agencies each with its own parochial interests and turf. As in 1901, it is the task of assembling a few of the best creative brains in the country to study the problems and—with assistance from federal and DC agencies as well as the public—plan how can best expand and rejuvenate our central public space.

Here are some of the questions the new commission might want to explore that would help shape the Mall during the next century:

- Our country continues to produce national heroes and to honor them on the Mall, including the recent FDR Memorial and the coming MLK Jr. Memorial. In what places could we honor yet unknown greats of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
- We are suffering collective amnesia about our national history, especially among young people. How can we develop sites and programs that better utilize the Mall—both the traditional Mall and expansion areas—for civics education and activities?

- If the federal agencies continue to decentralize and move away from the Monumental Core area, what kind of new uses could the Federal Triangle (where GSA is already aware of vacancies) and other buildings serve?
- As the city's urban core expands southward towards the waterfront, the Mall will become the center of an increasingly dense residential and commercial city filled with citizens who will want places to meet and recreate. How can we develop a 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Mall that meets the needs that will arise as the population and function diversifies?
- We have never fully developed our riverfronts. As we deal with global warming, how can we best deal with potential flooding while making the riverfront more of a destination? Half the Mall already lies in a flood zone. We are blessed with hundreds of acres of largely undeveloped land left over from the Army Corps of Engineers landfill project. How can this land best be used?
- Most important, our nation's role in the world has changed dramatically since 1902 and the last vision. How can the National Mall best symbolize our concept of who we are as a people and nation and where we hope to be a century from now?

When Congress declared the Mall "a substantially completed work of civic art" with the intention of protecting the Mall from overcrowding, it failed to couple its action with a program for long-term expansion as the McMillan Commission did. Now Congress needs to take leadership once again and charter a new McMillan-type commission to imagine how we can best imagine the future of our National Mall, to allow the Mall to grow creatively to serve its role as a stage for our ever-evolving democracy.

### **The National Mall Conservancy Filling Gaps**

The National Coalition to Save Our Mall and the National Mall Conservancy are dedicated to helping fill the existing gaps in Mall management and programming and in developing a structured public voice to make this happen.

The National Mall Conservancy is working with government agencies and other citizens groups on a number projects:

- There is no comprehensive recycling program on the Mall, each agency and building does its own thing. We've studied this and I've approached the Federal Environmental Executive about taking this on for the Mall as a whole
- Transportation and circulation are limited. Tourmobile provides interpretive tours at \$25 a day for an adult but the Circulator runs only during the week and peak hours and doesn't serve the western Mall area. Nor does Metro with bus service. A graduate course in transportation policy planning at George Mason University undertook for us and just completed a review at our request and there are serious gaps. It is not easy, especially for older people, children, and those with disabilities to get around the long expanses. The GMU report and Powerpoint presentation are posted at [http://policy.gmu.edu/programs/programs\\_tpol\\_practica.html](http://policy.gmu.edu/programs/programs_tpol_practica.html)

- There is no Mall visitors' center, which we think could be nicely provided in the Smithsonian's Arts & Industries Building, with information, maps, a police substation for security, snacks, restrooms. (I give tours on the Mall and the most frequent question I get is where are the restrooms.)
- Until the Coalition produced a map, there was no overall map and historical guide. We prepared the first ever recreation guide to the Mall as there is confusion over who has jurisdiction over the ballfields that are well utilized by DC residents for softball, soccer and so on.
- Sustainable landscaping will be critically important in the future and we've been in conversations with the USDA which is moving forward with a creative sustainability landscape for its building on the Mall, conceived as an open-air classroom of USDA policies for stormwater, recycling, sustainable plantings, and so on.
- While new FEMA flood maps have spurred DC and federal agencies to work on urgent flood control problems, the challenges of stormwater and flooding will require sustained, long-term creative solutions. We have compiled an extensive bibliography of resources that can be useful in future development of a larger regional approach to flooding and global warming.

### **What Stands in the Way?**

When I present these ideas to groups throughout the city and region, audiences regularly ask me, "What's standing in the way?" I can speak from experience that the public, and even many federal and DC planners, are excited by our vision and the great opportunity for creating a 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Mall vision.

But let's not fool ourselves. This will not be easy. Before a Senate hearing on *The Future of the National Mall* in 2005, Chairman Craig Thomas said he intended to create a Mall Commission. But he then changed his mind after the NPS, NCPC, and Commission of Fine Arts discouraged him, claiming that it would simply add another layer of bureaucracy. And besides, they would do the visionary planning themselves. Three years later, we see that's not so.

The need is more urgent than ever. Sustainability is a top priority but no one of the agencies can tackle it adequately, nor can their collective efforts rise to the level needed to confront the rising problems of flooding and stormwater. Sinking seawalls at the Tidal Basin can be repaired, but we need to rethink the whole character of the hundreds of acres of landfill along the shores of our rivers.

Moreover, DC urgently needs a voice in shaping the Mall of the future, as do local residents and the American public. Only Congress can make that future happen.

### **Imagining a Visit to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Mall**

Imagine what the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Mall could be with the kind of leadership and vision that was applied by the McMillan Commission—whose members included Daniel Burnham, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., Charles McKim, and Augustus Saint-Gaudens—some of the nation's leading designers. In case you are not aware, the McMillan Commission conducted

its research by touring some of the great urban spaces and parks of Europe. I'd happily join in any future research endeavors of this sort.

Seriously, with more than half the Mall built on landfill and suffering effects of flooding and failing infrastructure, we need to go beyond repairing problems to *rethinking* them. The Mall could be a showcase of the most innovative and state-of-the-art approaches to modern challenges of climate change. It could be transformed into an open-air classroom that engages residents and visitors of all ages, with demonstration projects for restoring turf grass, native vegetation, historic streams and wetlands, as well as recycling and whatever new solutions emerge in coming years and decades. Mall expansion could include rethinking and reconfiguring the landfill on both sides of the Potomac and Anacostia rivers.

I would be willing to follow up with anyone on the Committee who would like to learn more about these ideas.

Attachments: 4 Images

Judy Scott Feldman, Ph.D.  
President and Chair  
National Coalition to Save Our Mall  
9507 Overlea Drive  
Rockville, MD 20850  
[jfeldman@savethemall.org](mailto:jfeldman@savethemall.org)  
301-340-3938