

**Statement of John E. “Chip” Akridge, III, Chairman, Akridge  
Chair, Trust for the National Mall  
Before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands  
Committee on Natural Resources**

**Restoring and Preserving the National Mall**

**Tuesday, May 20, 2008**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands, I am Chip Akridge, Chairman of Akridge, a local commercial real estate development and management firm.

I am here today in my capacity as Chairman of the non-profit organization, the Trust for the National Mall. The Trust for the National Mall is a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting the National Park Service mission to “preserve ... unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values ...for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.” As the official funding partner of the National Park Service for the National Mall, the Trust has a long term goal to raise over \$500 million to help return the Park to a landscape of extraordinary beauty and to better connect visitors to its unique and important history as the platform of our democracy.

After years of deferred maintenance on the National Mall, the current cost of restoring “America’s Front Yard” is a staggering \$350 million. This figure does not include physical improvements to handle the current volume of 25 million annual visitors or money for educational programs.

The Park Service cannot restore “America’s Front Yard” with its current budget. This urgently needed work can be funded and completed only through a creative public-private partnership, which is what the Trust for the National Mall is proposing.

Over the last twenty years, I’ve enjoyed regular jogs through downtown D.C. and across the National Mall. I started this routine to check on my properties throughout the District and ended each run with a scenic reminder of why I love this city, and a reminder of why I am proud to be an American.

While I would look at the amazing icons on the National Mall: the sun coming up over the Capitol, the flags circling the Washington Monument, and the Jefferson, Lincoln and war Memorials, I rarely looked at the National Mall as a property manager. Over four years ago, someone challenged me to look closer at the condition of the park, and sadly what I saw did not make this American proud. The National Mall, “America’s Front Yard,” was and is a disgrace.

So with the help of several Washingtonians, I founded the Trust for the National Mall in an effort to restore the National Mall to a place of beauty befitting our nation’s Capitol.

We knew that we wouldn't be alone in our efforts since there were many people in this community who cared about this sacred and historic space. We were right.

We've modeled the Trust after the Central Park Conservancy in New York. Thirty years ago, half of Central Park was closed and its 800 acres were completely run down. In 1980, Mayor Koch asked Bill Beinecke, former Chairman of S&H Green Stamps, to lead a private effort to restore that park, and a successful public-private partnership was born.

More than 25 years later and with close to \$500 million raised, Central Park is truly a world-class urban space. We hope to follow their lead, raise a similar amount, and restore the National Mall to a place of beauty and pride for visitors and future generations.

Last November, the Trust held its national launch when Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne announced the Trust's designation as the official partner of the National Park Service (NPS) to raise private funds to be added to Federal funds for execution of the National Mall Plan. Under the leadership of the Secretary and NPS Director Mary Bomar, our partnership is flourishing. They, along with the new National Mall and Memorial Parks Superintendent, Peggy O'Dell, truly see the value in creating productive public-private partnerships to restore our national parks and have been terrific leaders in moving the Trust forward because they are committed to this American treasure.

Today, with budget cuts and a deferred maintenance bill of \$5 billion in the NPS system, the work cannot be done by the government alone. The National Mall carries a \$350 million deferred maintenance deficit, and with 25 million annual visitors (more visitors than Yellowstone, Yosemite and the Grand Canyon parks combined) the decay from this wear and tear is massive and continues to grow. The NPS has done an outstanding job with the funds available to them, but those funds have been woefully inadequate to enable the NPS to properly maintain the park.

The National Park Service is working diligently pursuing the critical work of preparing the National Mall Plan which will determine the future of the National Mall and will be the blueprint for our work. The NPS is working with over twenty cooperating agencies and thirty consulting parties to prepare the National Mall Plan. In all over 500 professionals will have reviewed and commented on the plan by the time it is approved. Additionally, during the plan scoping phase NPS held press conferences, issued media releases, published a newsletter requesting participation, and held a symposium and public meetings. More than 23,000 Americans from across the country have submitted their comments to the plan. The most important messages from the public have been to protect the space for First Amendment rights and freedom of expression demonstrations, increase the number of toilets and food facilities, and improve the physical beauty and quality of the area.

The National Park Service leadership and staff have taken very seriously the guidance and vision of these organizations and the thousands of Americans in developing the final plan. The NPS is diligently pursuing the critical work of preparing the National Mall Plan which is due to be released at the end of 2008 and will serve as a blueprint for the NPS and the Trust's work.

In addition to the estimated \$350 million needed for the deferred maintenance backlog, approximately \$100 million is needed for infrastructure improvements like repairing or

building additional food and restroom facilities and \$50 million is needed for educational programming, to tell the story of our country's rich history found in the park to all its visitors.

The National Mall, the 700-acre stretch of hallowed ground located between the Capitol and the Lincoln Memorial and from Constitution Avenue to the Jefferson Memorial, has come to be known worldwide as a symbol of democracy and America's heritage. It encompasses the strength and proud history of our nation, symbolizes the democracy that our forefathers worked so hard to secure, and memorializes the sacrifices of so many who have given their lives to preserve. It is "America's Front Yard."

Our project is unique: restore and preserve one of our greatest American icons for all visitors and future generations. For some of us the National Mall is our backyard, but its real reach and purpose is without boundaries. Because of this, we know our efforts must be far-reaching in scope and require the support of volunteers ranging from gardeners and academics to individual and major donors from across the country. Our efforts will include outreach and education to all Americans, including students and parents, community leaders and patrons, educators and historians.

As a real estate developer and property manager, I know what an immensely difficult and ongoing task it is to maintain the National Mall in world-class condition given the enormous usage of the space. But its purpose is to honor our forefathers and all the people who have made our country what it is today. It must be fixed and maintained and protected for First Amendment use in perpetuity.

We believe – and are certain that you will agree – that the National Mall is one of the Nation's chief cultural assets. There is no other place in the United States that celebrates our democracy, freedom of speech, leadership, and heroism like the National Mall, America's Front Yard. And it needs all of our help now.

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