

# MEDIA RELEASE



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## **Commission Unanimously Approves Concept Design for Pennsylvania Avenue in Front of the White House** *Plan Will Create a Welcoming and Beautiful Main Street for America*

**Washington, DC** – The National Capital Planning Commission today unanimously approved a plan to give a facelift to America’s most famous Avenue – the stretch of Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House.

The 12-member Commission reviewed an updated version of Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates’ design before making its decision. NCPC selected the Van Valkenburgh proposal from among plans submitted by four of the country’s preeminent landscape architect firms. The New York based firm reworked and refined the plan since first unveiling it to the Commission in the summer of 2002.

For nearly seven years – since the Oklahoma City bombing – the stretch of Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House has been closed to vehicular traffic, and scattered with ad-hoc security barriers ranging from large concrete planter pots to jersey barriers and makeshift guard huts. Prior to the events of 9-11, the Commission’s Interagency Security Task Force examined in great detail the feasibility of reopening the Avenue, but following the deadly terrorist attack it became apparent the street would stay closed for the foreseeable future due to legitimate security concerns.

The Van Valkenburgh Associates’ design is aimed at removing all of the makeshift security measures and leaving in their place a beautiful civic space worthy of America’s “Main Street.” The design’s central elements include new paving materials and tree planting within the civic space; a route for a planned transit system; a combination of retractable, removable, and fixed bollards; and new security booths.

"The conditions in front of the White House are an embarrassment and an eyesore," said chairman of the Interagency Security Task Force, Richard Friedman. "I wholeheartedly support Van Valkenburgh's design. It will remove all of the clutter and create a dignified and safe place for viewing the White House grounds. The plan is straightforward and aesthetically pleasing. We have worked long and hard on this most complex problem and reached consensus with the numerous interests of the many stakeholders."

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“The simple elegance that first attracted us to the Van Valkenburgh design has endured through the development process,” said NCPC Chairman John V. Cogbill, III. “With its selection of paving, landscaping, and security features, the Van Valkenburgh concept gives this important civic space the dignity it deserves while protecting the inhabitants, workers, and visitors that enter this special precinct.”

In place of jersey barriers, the Van Valkenburgh concept utilizes specially designed metal bollards. Retractable bollards will also be installed to allow for the passage of secured vehicles at entrance points on 15th and 17th Streets, on Pennsylvania Avenue, and at entrances on Jackson and Madison Places. In order to accommodate the inaugural parade, removable bollards would be placed at the Pennsylvania Avenue entrances of 15th and 17th Streets.

The concept design proposes replanting trees in place of the existing concrete bollards along Pennsylvania Avenue, where a row of trees once existed. New trees will also be planted at 15th and 17th Streets with a single row on the north side of the Avenue, and a double row on the south side. The tree rows will help to create a welcoming public space and provide a more dignified view of the White House grounds.

In addition, the Van Valkenburgh team proposes that the design of the security booths be inspired by the masonry piers of the White House fence, which employ a combination of stonework and metal elements. The concept also envisions the booths being visually incorporated into the street design, having a slender profile in the east-west axis, and complementing the grand scale of the White House fence. The booths will have a historical influence, but will also be reflective of our time. Plans for Pennsylvania Avenue also include replacing or refurbishing the light poles along the length of the Avenue with the original twin lamp that Henry Bacon designed for Washington, D.C.

District of Columbia Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton believes the plan is an important start. “For the city, the Van Valkenburgh design represents the first step toward the ultimate reopening of Pennsylvania Avenue,” said Congresswoman Norton. “The design rescues the Avenue from the events of 1995 while adroitly inviting its return to full use. The next important step in delivering our White House from the signature of terrorism is to reopen E Street for use by the American people.”

In an effort to help unify Lafayette Park with the White House, the concept proposes a surface of durable and stabilized granular stone, similar to that currently used at Buckingham Palace in London. The paving material would offer the durability of asphalt, while providing a character that is more pedestrian friendly. The paved surface will slope upward slightly, to emphasize the raised elevation of the White House.

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There is some historic precedent to the use of this paving material on America's "Main Street" – the surface was first used in the United States along Pennsylvania Avenue. At the far end of Pennsylvania Avenue at 15th and 17th Streets, large granite pavers will accentuate entry to the precinct, which is one of the most important public spaces in America.

A Circulator Transit System – a new hop-on/hop-off shuttle service now being planned for Downtown Washington – could follow a two-way route along Pennsylvania Avenue between 15th and 17th Streets. Alternatively, it could follow a one-way route, heading north along 17th Street, east on H Street, turning south on Jackson Place and winding around Lafayette Park, back to H Street, and south again on 15th Street.

"One of the key challenges I faced in designing this concept was making sure it could be easily reversible, and allow for vehicular use, should the Avenue reopen in the future," said landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh. "Initially I envisioned a separate lane for the proposed Circulator, but when historic preservationists firmly resisted this idea, we were able to amend our plans in order to preserve the Avenue's historic width and especially the east-west axis in front of the White House."

Van Valkenburgh's plan to allow for reversibility, as well as a proposed circulator, were critical factors considered by Washington, DC Mayor Anthony Williams. "While we look forward to the day we can reopen America's "Main Street" – Pennsylvania Avenue – I believe that the Van Valkenburgh design is a major improvement," said Mayor Williams. "We appreciate that the plan is both reversible and allows for access by the proposed downtown circulator. We remain concerned, however, about other street closures in the area, especially E Street."

Congress has allocated \$6.1 million for planning and design and for the initiation of construction on Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House. Of this, \$2.8 million is to complete the planning and design of the project, and \$3.3 million is for conducting structural testing of streetscape components, initial surveying work and utility location. In addition, \$5 million is allocated to the Federal Highway Administration for transportation studies to address the feasibility of a tunnel and to address other traffic problems resulting from street closures in the immediate vicinity of the White House. The President's 2004 Budget includes \$15 million for construction of improvements on Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House, which is expected to be ready for the 2005 Inaugural Parade.

The Federal Highway Administration, in consultation with NCPC, will manage the project. The Van Valkenburgh plan goes to the Commission of Fine Arts later this month, and an environmental assessment is due to be released in April. NCPC expects to review the preliminary phase for the project in June 2003.

The plan to redo this stretch of Pennsylvania Avenue is one of the first projects being undertaken in conjunction with the Commission's The National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan. The plan addresses the alarming proliferation of makeshift security measures that have cropped up throughout Washington's Monumental Core in recent years. The plan proposes a variety of security measures to balance the need for security with good urban design. It is the result of a wide-reaching collaboration of numerous federal and city government agencies, the professional planning and urban design community and the public. The plan deals only with building perimeter security – not chemical, biological, and other potential terrorist threats – and addresses security on federal property, not private.

In addition to reviewing plans for Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House, the Commission today also unanimously approved James Ingo Freed's concept design for the Air Force Memorial to honor men and women of the U.S. Air Force. The design is intended to evoke soaring images of flight, while providing a spectacular visual gateway into the Nation's Capital. The three-acre site, on land occupied by the Arlington Navy Annex, rises some 100 feet above the Pentagon and also provides clear views of Arlington National Cemetery and the Monumental Core. The site is one of 20 prime sites identified in the Commission's 2001 Memorials and Museums Master Plan.

In its evaluation of the project, NCPC staff recommended that the Commission approve the design, but urged the Department of Defense to work on improving pedestrian and vehicular connections to the site, as well as avoid pursuing a lighting scheme that would include a flashing red light to illuminate the memorial at night. The design will be presented to the Commission of Fine Arts later this month.

*The National Capital Planning Commission is the federal government's central planning agency in the District of Columbia and surrounding counties in Maryland and Virginia. The Commission provides overall planning guidance for federal land and buildings in the region. It also reviews the design of federal projects and memorials, oversees long-range planning for future development, and monitors capital investment by federal agencies.*

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