

COMMISSION ACTION

NCPC File No. 6597



VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL VISITOR CENTER

On the Grounds of the Lincoln Memorial bounded by Constitution Avenue,
Henry Bacon Drive, Lincoln Memorial Circle, and 23rd Street, NW
Washington, D.C.

Submitted by the National Park Service

June 4, 2009

Commission Action Requested by Applicant

Approval of comments on revised concept design pursuant to Public Law 108-126 and the Commemorative Works Act (40 U.S.C. 8905).

Commission Action

The Commission:

Acknowledges the significance of this project and the difficult challenge of designing it at this historically significant and sensitive site on the National Mall.

Notes that the National Capital Planning Commission and the Commission of Fine Arts jointly developed site specific design guidelines for the project to comply with the Commemorative Works Act requirement to “ensure that the proposed work shall be so located as to prevent interference with, or encroachment upon, any existing commemorative work and to protect, to the maximum extent practicable, open space and existing public use.” The design guidelines also serve as mitigation for the Executive Director’s Finding of No Significant Impact for site selection under the National Environmental Policy Act.

Confirms that the design meets the following design guidelines:

- *“The Visitor Center’s entrance will be only minimally visible from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to satisfy the project’s purpose and need, but in accordance with the authorizing legislation not interfere with or encroach upon the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.” (#2)*

- *“To maintain the character of the historic landscape, the Visitor’s Center’s design concept will be based on maintaining the existing grade, and any new slopes will be gradual. The project will raise the existing site grade only to allow for an accessible entry ramp.” (#3)*

The revised concept has raised the grade of the site by three and a half feet to better accommodate the entry ramp.

- *“The Visitor Center’s design will provide only the paved area necessary for visitors to enter and exit the building and which will also provide service access. The design will not include additional paved area for gathering space or queuing.” (#7)*

The revised concept has reduced the length of the paved ramps from Henry Bacon Drive and Constitution Avenue to the entrance by raising the grade of the site.

- *“The project will not include new vehicle parking areas.” (#8)*
- *“The Visitor Center will have a single entrance for both visitors and service.” (#9)*
- *“The Visitor Center will be constructed only on the portion of the site that lies outside of the critical root zone of existing elm trees. The applicant will develop a tree protection plan to protect and preserve the trees both during and after construction in accordance with standard design and construction procedures.” (#11)*

The applicant has reoriented the Center further to the north to move it away from the perimeter tree root zone. The applicant has noted that the technical survey of the critical root zone of the existing elm trees is underway.

- *“The project will place new landscaping on the site in accordance with the National Park Service’s Cultural Landscape Report (CLR) for the Lincoln Memorial referenced in the Environmental Assessment and will maintain the open grass panel on the site surrounded at the site’s perimeter by elm trees.” (#12)*

Requires that with regard to the established design guidelines that also serve as mitigation under NEPA, and in concert with the CFA comments dated April 24th, 2009, that the design be modified to meet the following design guidelines:

- *“The Visitor Center will be constructed underground as required by the authorizing legislation for the project with no portion of the building or related building elements visible from any portion of the Lincoln Memorial steps and podium, from Constitution Avenue, and from within the axial view sheds of 23rd Street, NW and Henry Bacon Drive, NW.” (#1)*

The scale of the building openings has not been reduced and as a result the building is still visible from the Lincoln Memorial and the surrounding sidewalks. The courtyard and newly added guardrails will be visible from the Lincoln Memorial Stairs. While raising

the grade of the site has reduced the visibility of the Center from the corner of 23rd and Constitution Avenue, the south wall of the Center and the entry court are now more visible from Constitution Avenue near 22nd Street; and, the south and east walls are now more visible from Henry Bacon Drive. The ramp from Constitution Avenue and the related berms are also visible from Constitution Avenue and from Henry Bacon Drive. Finally, while the skylights are now flush with the grass level, NPS has not demonstrated that interior lighting emanating from the skylights and the courtyard will not be visible from these viewpoints.

- *“The Visitor Center will not intrude into the landscape. No protrusions such as skylights, monitors, light wells, or sunken areaways, will be visible from the sidewalk surrounding the site.”(#5)*

While raising the grade has reduced the visibility of the skylights from the sidewalks, the sunken entry way is now more visible from Henry Bacon Drive and from Constitution Avenue near 22nd Street.

- *“The Visitor Center design will not impede the use of the site for multi-purpose recreation on the site.” (#13)*

The submission shows an area measuring approximately 20% of the site will be available for formal recreational uses. However, the above ground footprint of the Center changes the nature of the landscape overall and limits the types of both passive and active activities that can be accommodated on the site because of the amount of area impacted by the skylights, courtyard, walkway and associated slopes from Constitution Avenue.

- *“The Visitor Center will be designed without guardrails or perimeter security elements.” (#14)*

The design of the two-story courtyard will necessitate a complex geometry of guardrails. In addition to the guard rails at the bottom of the ha-ha walls along the south and west sides of the courtyard, the revised concept shows that a screen wall on the north side of the courtyard will extend upward to function as a guardrail. There will also be a guardrail in the entryway area that overlooks the courtyard and around the roof of the emergency access stairwell. Finally, NPS will need to certify at final approval that the project will not have any perimeter security.

Advises the applicant to focus on the following revisions to the building design:

- Eliminate the walk from Constitution Avenue and associated berms so that the Center is less visible from Constitution Avenue and Henry Bacon Drive. This will also allow for more multi-recreational use on the site.
- Eliminate the skylights to minimize the Center’s intrusion on the landscape and to allow for multi-recreational use on the site.

- Reduce the size of the open courtyard and the length of needed guardrails to minimize visibility from the Lincoln Memorial.

Notes that the following design guidelines have yet to be addressed, as indicated by the applicant:

- *“The Visitor Center will be designed such that light emanating from the Center’s interior will not be visible from any portion of the Lincoln Memorial, from Constitution Avenue, and from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial so as not to interfere with or encroach upon the Lincoln Memorial or the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.” (#4)*

The applicant has not yet designed the project lighting

- *“The Visitor Center’s site lighting for public safety will not interfere with or encroach upon views to and from the Lincoln Memorial and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.” (#6)*

The applicant has not yet designed the project lighting.

- *“The Visitor Center’s associated pedestrian street crossing points will be designed to address traffic impacts effectively and to protect pedestrian safety.” (#10)*

The applicant has not yet designed the project’s pedestrian crossing points.

- *“Requires the National Park Service to reconstruct softball fields lost as a result of this project on another site within one-half (1/2) mile of Site A, in accordance with the mitigation required in the Executive Director’s finding of no significant impact for the project.”*

NPS has not yet responded to this requirement.

Reminds the applicant that:

- The Commission’s policies and procedures require supplemental NEPA documentation and further Section 106 Consultation as the design develops, beginning with the preliminary approval.

Deborah B. Young
Secretary to the National Capital Planning Commission