



Executive Director's Recommendation

Commission Meeting: February 2, 2012

PROJECT
Lafayette Building Streetscape and Site Improvements

Lafayette Building
811 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC

SUBMITTED BY

United States General Services Administration

NCPC FILE NUMBER

7340

NCPC MAP FILE NUMBER

21.00(38.00)43511

APPLICANT'S REQUEST

Preliminary and final approval of site development plans

PROPOSED ACTION

Approve as requested

REVIEW AUTHORITY

Approval
per 40 U.S.C. § 8722(b)(1) and (d)

PROJECT SUMMARY

The General Services Administration (GSA) has submitted preliminary and final site development plans for streetscape and site improvements at the Lafayette Building, located at 811 Vermont Avenue, NW. The project will upgrade the building site with new street trees, benches, street lighting, pavement, and wheelchair ramps. The site design includes three low bollards situated parallel to the building's front entrance, which are located and designed to protect pedestrians from errant vehicles. The building, which is currently undergoing modernization, is a National Historic Landmark and a contributing structure to the Fifteenth Street Financial Historic District.

KEY INFORMATION

- The project has been designed to meet Low Impact Development (LID) standards.
- The project will be implemented during the ongoing interior renovation and modernization of the Lafayette Building, scheduled for completion in 2016.
- The current design has eliminated the previously proposed physical perimeter security surrounding the building, and proposes to install only three low bollards to protect the front entrance area from errant vehicles.

RECOMMENDATION

Approves the preliminary and final site development plans for streetscape and site improvements at the Lafayette Building, 811 Vermont Avenue, NW, as shown in NCPC Map File No. 21.00(38.00)43511.

Commends the U.S. General Services Administration for its decision to forego permanent physical perimeter security at the Lafayette Building in favor of a more environmentally-

sustainable streetscape design that improves the aesthetic quality and overall accessibility of surrounding public space, and improves the settings of the historic Lafayette Building and Fifteenth Street Financial Historic District.

PROJECT REVIEW TIMELINE

Previous actions	<p>March 2002 - Preliminary and Final approval of site development plans for temporary installation of concrete planters at the main entrance to the Lafayette Building.</p> <p>May 2006 – Preliminary approval of the Lafayette Building’s modernization plans and concept review of the building’s site improvements.</p> <p>April 2007 – Final approval of the Lafayette Building’s modernization plans and requirement for GSA to provide additional environmental documentation to the Commission prior to any future submission of perimeter security elements.</p>
Remaining actions (anticipated)	None

Prepared by M. Weil on January 26, 2012

I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Site

The Lafayette Building is situated on the block bound by Vermont Avenue, 15th Street, H Street, and I Street, NW, with its main entrance located on Vermont Avenue (Figure 1). The building, which currently houses offices for the Veterans Administration and the Export-Import Bank of Washington, occupies a majority of the block, wrapping around the Shoreham Building (a hotel). There is an entrance to an underground parking garage along H Street and the rear of the building is adjacent to an 'L' shaped alley, which connects to 15th Street and H Street. The alley provides service access to both the Lafayette and Shoreham Buildings. McPherson Square is located to the north of the block and Lafayette Square is located to the southwest of the site, connected by the diagonal Vermont Avenue. The building setting is significant with its location in the Fifteenth Street Financial Historic District, between McPherson Square and Lafayette Square, along a L'Enfant diagonal street (Vermont Avenue), and near the White House. The Lafayette Building is designated a National Historic Landmark.¹

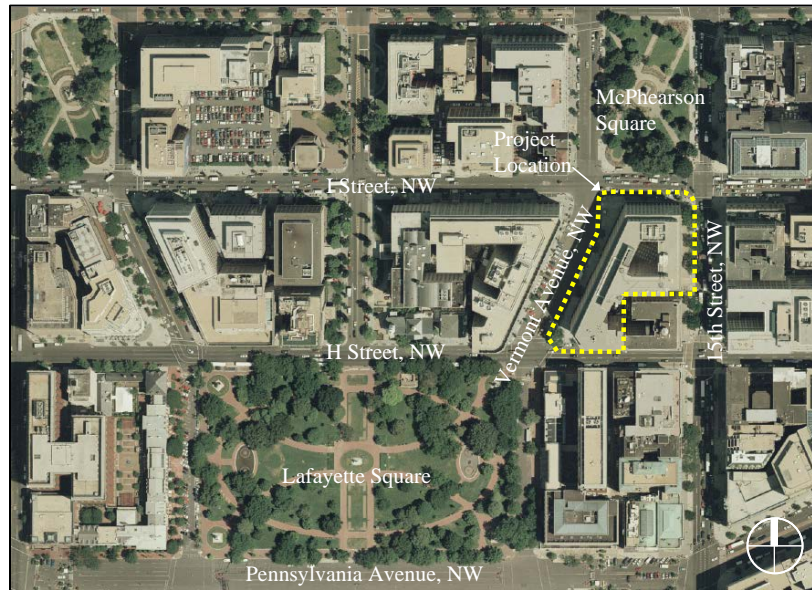


Figure 1: Local vicinity map showing Lafayette Building

Background

At its March 7, 2002 meeting, the Commission approved preliminary and final site development plans for temporary installation of concrete planters at the main entrance to the Lafayette Building, along with the GSA commitment to replace with permanent security at the completion of the Urban Design and Security Plan for the Downtown area. The Commission approved the preliminary modernization plans for the Lafayette Building, and commented on a perimeter security and site improvement concept plan in 2006. The Commission approved the final plans for the building modernization in 2007, with the exception of the perimeter security and site improvements. The following comments were provided by the Commission:

¹ The Lafayette Building was built in 1940, and one of the first federal government office buildings in the city to have central air-conditioning and an underground garage. The building was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2005.

- Submit for approval any proposed provisions for a guard booth at the alley connecting to 15th Street NW; and resubmit for approval a fence-wall at the roof adjacent to the Shoreham Building, and, before any future submission of perimeter security elements,
- Provide information required for the Commission to fulfill its obligations under the National Environmental Protection Act, and
- Engage in further Section 106 consultation as specified in the Memorandum of Agreement.

GSA is now proposing a revised streetscape and site improvement plan that excludes physical perimeter security with the exception of a few minor elements at the building's main entrance. The new design was developed through coordination with NCPC, United States Commission of Fine Arts (CFA), District of Columbia State Historic Preservation Office (DC SHPO), District Department of Transportation, and the District of Columbia Office of Planning.

Proposal

The project is intended to improve the overall streetscape and grounds of the Lafayette Building by enhancing the tree buffer and street-lighting along adjacent streets; re-organizing the public space to better accommodate human activity; and re-designing the site to better reflect the location's significant setting. Specifically, the design includes the following elements:

Street Trees

- Swamp White Oaks located adjacent to H Street;
- Scarlet Oaks located adjacent to Vermont Avenue;
- Columnar English Oaks located adjacent to the main building entrance (Vermont Avenue);
- Sweet Gums located adjacent to I Street;
- Honey Locusts located between the building seating/gathering area (adjacent to the northeast side of the building) and the 15th Street sidewalk.

Tree Planting Areas

- Enlarged tree boxes located along 15th Street;
- Continuous soil trenches located along 15th Street (between the building seating/gathering area and sidewalk), I Street, Vermont Avenue, and H Street.

Paving

- Black granite located in front of the main Vermont Avenue building entrance (extending from the building face to approximately 1/3 of the distance to the street) and in front of the new 15th Street entrance (northeast corner of the building);
- Light (Mt. Airy) granite located on the new wheelchair ramps and banded around the new soil trenches and trees boxes; and
- London Pavers located in all other areas.

Street Lighting

- New street lights that are consistent with local streetscape standards.

Street Furniture

- 12 benches located along Vermont Avenue and 4 benches located along 15th Street;
- Three low (2'-4" high) bollards located directly in front of the main Vermont Avenue building entrance.

Vendor Areas

- Two curb-side sites located along Vermont Avenue (near the Vermont Avenue/I Street intersection) and one curb-site site located along 15th Street (near the I Street/15th Street).

According to the plans submitted by the applicant, 11 existing street trees (three trees on 15th Street, four trees on I Street, three trees on Vermont Avenue, and one tree on H Street) will be preserved; one tree will be removed (on Vermont Avenue); and 17 new trees will be planted (Figure 2). The new trees will be planted along 15th Street (seven), Vermont Avenue (eight), and H Street (two).

The proposed site design will accommodate increased subsurface capacity for tree roots, with enlarged tree boxes and continuous soil trenches (5 feet in width). The soil trenches/tree boxes will use Low Impact Design (LID) features to minimize storm water run-off (Figure 3), with more compact soil placed directly under the trees for support, and more porous soil located adjacent to the tree roots to enable water percolation.



Figure 2: Street Tree Illustrative Plan

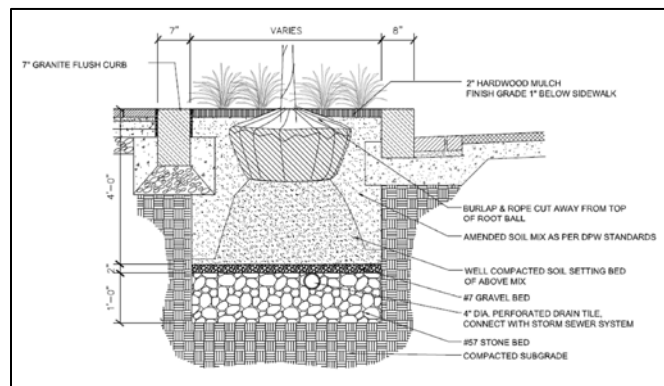


Figure 3: Street Tree Planting Detail

The proposed design is consistent with local streetscape standards, with London pavers shown along the sidewalks and specialized paving materials used to emphasize particular features such as building entrances, tree boxes, and wheelchair ramps (Figure 4). Black granite will be installed in front of both the Vermont Avenue and 15th Street entrances. Mt Airy Granite (light in color) will border tree boxes and trenches, and be used for the wheelchair ramps and the bollards.

The sidewalks along Vermont Avenue and 15th Street will have a 10-foot clear width and the sidewalks along H Street and I Street will have an 8-foot clear width to accommodate pedestrian circulation. The tree planting areas will be bordered by low (1'-6" high) decorative metal fences and the planting spaces will be crossed by intermittent paved areas to provide pedestrian access between the sidewalk and adjacent parking lanes. The design will provide street benches along Vermont Avenue and 15th Street, and identifies three potential street vending zones (two along Vermont Avenue and one along 15th Street) to help activate the public space (Figure 5).

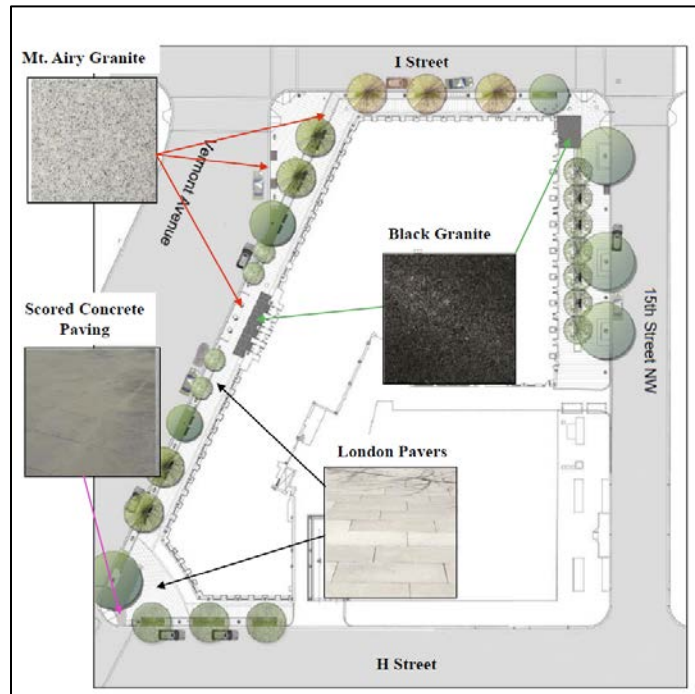


Figure 4: Paving Materials Illustrative Plan

II. PROJECT ANALYSIS/CONFORMANCE

Analysis

The proposed streetscape and site improvements are more attractive and functional for the Lafayette Building's tenants and visitors, as well as for the city's general urban vibrancy (Figure 6). The design includes few physical security elements and will improve the public space surrounding the building with street furniture and vending space, improved street tree



Figure 5: Street Amenity Illustrative Plan

canopies, and enhanced street lighting. Therefore, staff recommends that the Commission approve the preliminary and final site development plans for streetscape and site improvements at the Lafayette Building, and commend the U.S. General Services Administration for its decision to forego permanent physical perimeter security at the Lafayette Building in favor of a more environmentally-sustainable streetscape design that improves the aesthetic quality and overall accessibility of surrounding public space, and improves the settings of the historic Lafayette Building and Fifteenth Street Financial Historic District.

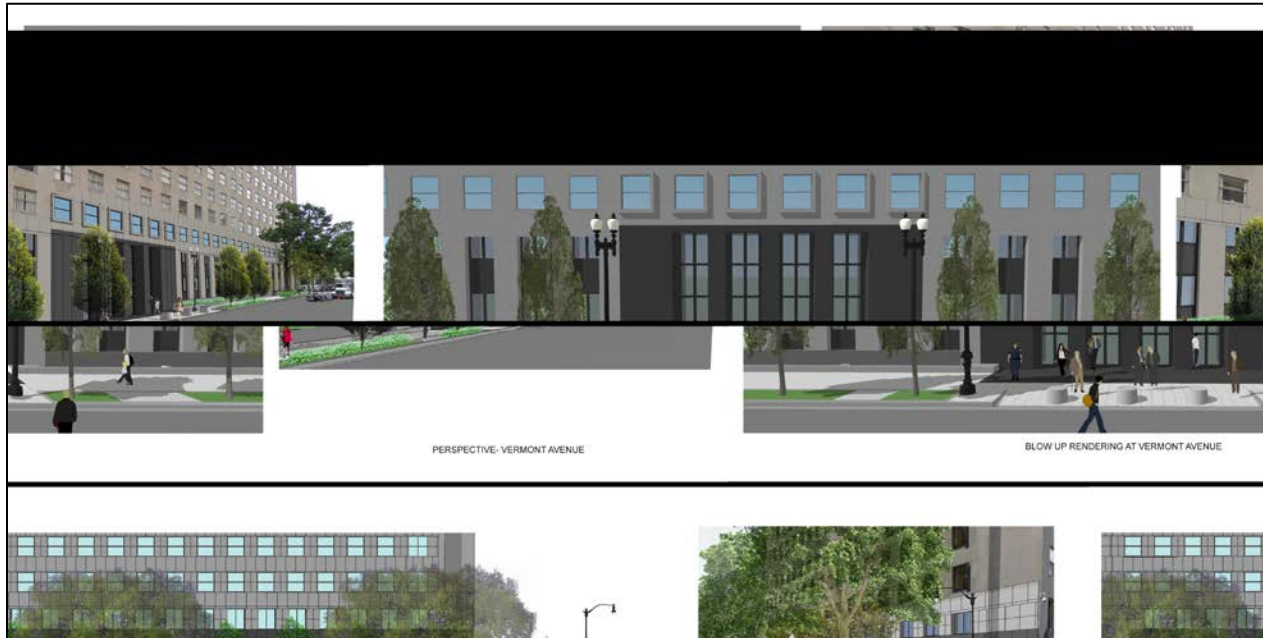


Figure 6: Various "future condition" perspective renderings

Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital

Staff finds that the proposed project would not be inconsistent with the *Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital: Federal Elements*. In particular, the project is consistent with the following policies of the Federal Environment Element and the Preservation and Historic Features Element:

- Encourage the use of innovative and environmentally friendly "Best Management Practices" in site and building design ... (Water Quality Policies);
- Incorporate new trees and vegetation to moderate temperatures, minimize energy consumption, and mitigate storm water runoff. (Land Resources Policies);
- Enhance the environmental quality of the national capital by replacing street trees where they have died or where they have been removed due to development. (Land Resources Policies);
- Protect the settings of historic properties, including views to and from the sites where significant, as integral parts of the historic character of the property. (Stewardship of Historic Properties Policies);

- Work cooperatively with local agencies to ensure that development adjacent to historic properties does not detract from their historic character. (Stewardship of Historic Properties Policies);
- Provide and maintain street trees to help frame axial views and reinforce the historic green character of the nation's capital. (The Historic Plan of Washington, D.C. Policies);
- Take into account the historic spatial significance of the L-Enfant rights-of-way and associated reservations when designing and locating physical security measures along L'Enfant streets and reservations. (The Historic Plan of Washington, D.C. Policies).

National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan Objectives and Policies

The proposal will replace five existing temporary planters located across the main entrance of the Lafayette Building with three hardened, low (2'-4" high), wide (3-feet in diameter) bollards, placed with 6'-2" clear widths. The bollards are designed to protect the entrance area from errant vehicles that may mistakenly drive up the widened wheelchair ramp, and the submission states that the bollards can be used for seating as well. Staff notes that with the exception of these bollards, the proposed site design has eliminated all other physical perimeter security measures compared to the pre-2010 design.² As such, staff finds that the current proposal is consistent with the *National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan Objectives and Policies*, adopted by the Commission in May 2005. In particular, the following objectives and policies and directly applicable to the project:

Objectives

- Protect the design principles inherent in D.C.'s historic plan and its historic resources and minimize the physical and visual intrusion of security barriers into public space;
- Strike a balance between physical perimeter security for federal buildings and the vitality of the public realm;

Policies

- The placement of security barriers in public space is discouraged and should be minimized. (C.1. Barrier Placement and Design);
- The location of perimeter security barriers should minimize interruption of pedestrian circulation. (C.1. Barrier Placement and Design);
- Perimeter security barriers ... near cross walks or other highly used pedestrian areas should be minimized; barriers that are needed should be located to allow safe pedestrian waiting areas and pedestrian movement. (C.1. Barrier Placement and Design);
- The design of security barriers, including their mass, form and materials should respond to the architectural and landscape context in which they are located and complement and aesthetically enhance the special character of the associated building and precinct. (C.2. Urban Landscape Contextual Design);
- Protection of existing trees, including their canopies and root systems, and new street tree planting is encouraged when the plantings will be in context with the existing or planned streetscape of the corridor. This will minimize the visual impact and the physical intrusion of the security barriers in the urban landscape. (C.2. Urban Landscape Contextual Design);

² The previous design included a line of 39" high bollards along H Street, Vermont Avenue, I Street, and 15th Street, adjacent to all sides of the Lafayette Building.

- Diagonal Avenue should be treated in a manner that emphasizes their landscape features, including significant tree and ground plantings. (C.4. Comprehensive Streetscape Design).

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)

GSA has completed its own NEPA review and concluded that the project is a categorical exclusion (CATEX). GSA is relying upon its CATEX #5.4(b) which applies to acquisition of space by federal construction or lease construction, or expansion or improvement of an existing facility, subject to certain conditions.³ Staff has reviewed the proposal in accordance with NCPC's Environmental and Historic Preservation Policies and Procedures, and has also determined that the project can be categorically excluded from further environmental analysis and documentation. The CATEX that staff is relying upon applies to "repair, replacement, and routine installation of components such as windows, doors, roofs; and site elements such as site or building identification signs, sidewalks, patios, fences, retaining walls, curbs, or gates. Additional features include water distribution lines, and sewer lines which involve work that is essentially replacement in kind."

National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA)

In accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, the General Services Administration determined, in consultation with the District of Columbia State Historic Preservation Office (DC SHPO), that the project will not have an adverse effect on historic properties. The DC SHPO concurred with GSA's determination on December 22, 2011. In addition, staff notes that the DC SHPO commended GSA "for significantly reducing the proposed perimeter security elements so that they are more appropriate for their historic setting". Due to its review authority over the project, NCPC has an independent obligation to carry out the requirements of Section 106 of the NHPA. Staff met with GSA on site to review the project and concurred with GSA's determination of "no adverse effect".

III. CONSULTATION

Coordinating Committee

The Coordinating Committee reviewed the proposal at its January 11, 2012 meeting, and forwarded the proposal to the Commission with the statement that the proposal has been coordinated with all participating agencies. The participating agencies were NCPC; the District of Columbia Office of Planning; the District Department of Transportation; the District of Columbia Fire and Emergency Medical Services; the National Park Service; the General Services Administration; and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.

³ GSA's categorical exclusions can be found in Section 5.4 of the GSA Public Building Service NEPA Desk Guide, October 1999.

Coordination with local agencies

The project submission indicates that the project has been successfully coordinated with NCPC; United States Commission of Fine Arts; District Department of Transportation; District of Columbia Office of Planning; and DC SHPO.