

Federal Urban Design Element DRAFT Narrative and Policies

Draft Goal Statement: The federal government should provide and support a public realm that is reflective of Washington’s heritage and role as the nation’s capital.

The Federal Urban Design Element of the Comprehensive Plan provides guidance related to the quality of the function, form and design of Washington’s public realm. The Element describes key qualities that support the city’s distinguished character as the nation’s capital, including the resources that are important to the federal government. The policies also provide guidance to improve the overall design and planning of federal lands and facilities throughout the National Capital Region and to ensure they are integrated with their adjacent host communities.

Washington’s Evolving Urban Character

The urban design of Washington DC is unique among American cities. As one of the most iconic and methodically planned capitals in the world, the city was established at the intersection of the northern and southern regions of a fledgling nation. President George Washington selected the area at the confluence of the Potomac River and the Eastern Branch (now known as the Anacostia) as a symbolic location that would balance the interests of the nation’s agrarian south with the more urban commercial interests of the north. The Residence Act of 1790 established the area between the Eastern Branch and the Potomac River as the site for the new Federal City. In 1791, President Washington appointed Pierre L’Enfant to design the new capital city. L’Enfant worked with Andrew Ellicott to survey and plan the form of the city. The formal boulevards and sweeping views of Paris and Versailles were important inspirations for L’Enfant’s Plan. He was also moved by the country’s democratic ideals. Hence, L’Enfant conceived Washington as not just a functional city, but also as a symbolic landscape. He planned the United States Capitol building as the focal point of the new federal city and situated it high on Jenkins Hill, now known as Capitol Hill. The President’s House, a more modest structure, was situated down a grand boulevard, Pennsylvania Avenue. He laid a traditional street grid over a network of sweeping ceremonial boulevards that expressed the nation’s openness and grand aspirations. Where the two intersected, he proposed circles, squares and other public spaces to serve as focal points of civic and community life. The grandest of these public spaces is the National Mall, the nation’s most prominent gathering space for self-expression and commemoration.

By the turn of the 20th Century, the capital city had not fully realized L’Enfant’s vision. In 1901, Senator James McMillan convened a Commission to study the form of Washington and to improve its character in the grand traditions of the City Beautiful Movement. The resulting McMillan Plan formalized the National Mall, removing unsightly railroad tracks and other incompatible infrastructure from its space. The plan’s vision led to the grand commemorative and cultural spaces of the National Mall and established the Federal Triangle as a core federal enclave with public buildings reflecting the Beaux-Arts tradition.

Building upon the L'Enfant and McMillan Plans, other planning initiatives have shaped the form of the city. In 1997, the National Capital Planning Commission issued the Extending The Legacy Plan. The Plan sought to eliminate the barriers created in the years of urban renewal programs, including the removal of freeways and rail infrastructure that fragmented Washington's core. The Plan also proposed physically refocusing the city on the U.S. Capitol Building by strengthening the axial streets such as North, South, and East Capitol Streets.

Several subsequent planning initiatives strive to move the Legacy Plan toward implementation. In 2009, the joint NCPC and CFA Monumental Core Framework Plan suggested a series of infrastructure moves and redevelopment strategies that would better integrate Washington's neighborhoods with federal enclaves and commemorative sites. In 2012, NCPC released the draft Southwest Ecodistrict Plan, which provides recommendations to revitalize the Southwest Federal Center and create an all-new sustainable, mixed-use neighborhood. The Plan also incorporates energy and stormwater management principles on a precinct scale. Each of these planning initiatives are recognized in this Federal Urban Design Element and help establish the foundation for Washington's character now and into the future.

Defining a Capital City: Washington's Key Qualities

As the seat of the United States federal government, Washington embodies numerous qualities that define it as the nation's capital. However, it also has characteristics of a livable and growing world-class city. Together these qualities form the foundation of Washington's character and the basis for the policies in the Federal Urban Design Element. The federal government's activities related to public space design, federal building design and land management should reinforce and enhance these qualities. For example, buildings should be accessible, sustainable, and supportive of placemaking principles in Washington's communities. They should celebrate and activate Washington's unique public spaces and respect the core ideals of the L'Enfant, McMillan and Legacy Plans.

Key Qualities

- The presence of federal institutions, monumental buildings, international and cultural institutions and commemoration

The concentration of prominent federal institutions, such as the White House, the U.S. Capitol, and the buildings of the Federal Triangle are a central feature of iconic Washington. Likewise, the city is the home to international and cultural institutions such as foreign embassies, museums, and galleries. The museums of the Smithsonian Institution, for example, are each housed in iconic buildings that contribute to the character of the city. In addition to prominent buildings, Washington's parks and open spaces contribute strongly to its identity. From the National Mall to the more intimate pocket parks along Embassy Row, these memorial parks provide places for Americans to explore important topics of history and culture through art. They also serve as areas for relaxation and recreation.

- The presence of important regional resources and destinations such as Dulles Airport, Mount Vernon, Arlington Cemetery, the Civil War Defenses of Washington and historic parkways.

Beyond the L'Enfant City, there are numerous important resources and destinations that contribute to the character of the National Capital Region. Examples include important architectural resources such as Dulles Airport, a midcentury icon by architect Eero Saarinen, and commemorative spaces such as the Iwo Jima Memorial and Arlington National Cemetery. The region also contains historically significant sites such as George Washington's estate Mount Vernon and the Civil War Defenses of Washington (formerly known as Fort Circle Parks). Federal facilities and lands such as Fort Belvoir, the National Institutes of Health, and the rural-like setting of the George Washington Memorial Parkway contribute to the region's unmistakable sense of place.

- The legacy of the L'Enfant and McMillian Plans

The core elements of the L'Enfant and McMillian Plans are the foundation of central Washington's form. The L'Enfant Plan's formal street grid and resulting view corridors as well as its strategically placed public spaces form the backbone of central Washington's character. The McMillian Plan formalized and extended the National Mall, established the Federal Triangle and preserved the natural qualities of Rock Creek Park. These elements are a lasting legacy of these plans and provide key qualities that define the city's character.

- A horizontal skyline character composed of signature civic buildings and national icons

Washington's skyline is recognizable throughout the world. It is not characterized by tall, "skyscraper" commercial buildings. Rather, its skyline is distinguished by symbolic, civic features such as the U.S Capitol dome and the Washington Monument. These iconic skyline elements reflect the significance and founding of Washington as the capitol city of the United States, with public institutions at its core.

- The clear and distinct view corridors

Sweeping vistas between symbolic buildings, important open spaces, and public institutions define the capital city's public realm. The area's natural rolling topography enhances views to and from important landscapes. Important view corridors extend beyond the limits of the District of Columbia, and into the surrounding region, such as those of the Washington Monument from Ronald Reagan National Airport or the George Washington Memorial Parkway.

- The complimentary relationship between the streets and buildings

As a low-rise city, Washington is characterized by its "human-scaled" streets. A comfortable environment fostered in large part by the relationship of the height of buildings to the width of the street. Tall buildings can be imposing to the public space below and even cause temperature differences from opposite street sides because of shadowing affects. As a low-rise city with lower scaled buildings, Washington's streets have greater access to light and air. The result is an environment that feels more comfortable, less imposing, and generally more conducive to the activities of daily urban life.

- The important public space formed by squares, circles and parks

A legacy of the L'Enfant and McMillian Plans is a fine network of squares, circles and parks. These formal and informal public spaces, including the grand National Mall and rambling Rock Creek Park, provide opportunities for active and passive recreation, commemoration, and first amendment activities.

- The green quality of the city

Washington is frequently referred to as urban yet green. This is due in large part by the presence of a strong and growing tree canopy. In fact, Washington is greener today than it was just five years ago. The District's urban tree canopy grew by 2.1 percent since 2007 and now covers 37.2% of the city.

- The gateways of the city

Entering Washington from surrounding areas provides a dramatic experience and a visual queue that one is entering the capital city. Crossing the Potomac River via the Memorial, Key or 14th Street bridges provides sweeping views of the important symbolic buildings located in the city's core. Access points from Maryland through New York Avenue also provide visual glimpses to the U.S. Capitol Building's dome, indicating to travelers that they are entering the capital. These important gateways are a significant quality to Washington's distinctive character.

- The extensive waterfronts

Within the District of Columbia, there are approximately 47 miles of waterfront running along the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers and the Washington Channel. These areas are a tremendous asset to the city and provide open space, recreation, and development opportunity. Beyond the District of Columbia, areas such as Alexandria, Virginia have historic waterfronts contribute to the distinct character of the region.

Urban Design Element: Policies

The Urban Design Element is separated into two policy sections: The Character of the Capital and Federal Facilities and Property.

The Character of the Capital section frames the federal interest regarding the character of the capital and region. Policies in this section guide the federal government to protect the resources and urban design qualities that physically and symbolically support Washington as the nation's capital. These policies work in tandem with the District Urban Design Element of the Comprehensive Plan to establish goals for both the federal and District governments in enhancing the overall character of Washington, DC.

The Federal Facilities and Property section guide the design of federal buildings, campuses, and commemorative sites. The policies encourage the federal government to be greater stewards of the public realm and to integrate lands and buildings within their host communities.

The Character of the Capital

Washington functions both as the seat of the federal government and the home to a growing population approaching nearly 600,000 residents. It accommodates the permanent institutions and symbolic functions of a capital and the goods and services associated with individual daily life. The balance of federal and local activities shapes the urban design conditions of the city.

The Federal Urban Design element provides guidance on a range of topics where federal and local interests intersect. For example, federal buildings should strive to provide retail and other services that not only provide amenities for the federal employees but also provide benefits to the surrounding community. Commemorative spaces can function not only as a place for reflection, but also as places for recreation and gathering by neighbors. This integration must be influenced by both the federal and local governments working together. In planning for the overall character of the capital city, private development must relate and be integrated into the federal development and it must work collaboratively to create and support a dynamic capital city. The federal and local government must work together to ensure this integration in planning Washington.

The L'Enfant City and its Setting

The L'Enfant City represents the strongest concentration of federal interest in the region. The plan itself is on the National Register of Historic Places providing federal protection for its streets, development blocks, and public spaces, one of the few urban plans to receive this level of designation. Approximately 50% of the area within the L'Enfant City is federally owned. This includes iconic locations such as the U.S. Capitol and its grounds, the White House and surrounding Executive Office Buildings, the headquarter buildings of the Federal Triangle and the National Mall. The L'Enfant City also provides the location for the iconic structures which establish the character of the city skyline. The U.S. Capitol, The Washington Monument, and various memorials contribute to Washington's recognizable skyline. The area's natural topography, including a feature known as the topographic bowl provides a dramatic backdrop for these iconic buildings. The topographic bowl includes an elevated ridge – or escarpment - around the L'Enfant City that offers extraordinary views into a lower-lying area of symbolic buildings and sites. Development along the topographic bowl, which includes the escarpment along Florida Avenue, the Anacostia Hillside and the ridge in Arlington, County Virginia, should be kept low and at a level that does not compete with these skyline defining the public structures. At night, the skyline is reinforced by a hierarchy of lighting levels with the U.S. Capitol, the Washington Monument, and Lincoln Memorial being the most prominent.

This hierarchy should be maintained to protect the public definition of Washington's skyline. The policies in this section of the Urban Design Element establish the priorities for the federal government in curating the L'Enfant City and its setting.

Section A: The L'Enfant City and its Setting Policies

The federal government should implement and support policies and actions that:

1. Maintain the consistent building height and the relationship of building height and street width as established in the Height of Buildings Act within the L'Enfant City.

2. Maintain or reestablish the integrity of the original L'Enfant Plan rights-of-way wherever possible.
3. Encourage private and public building design that enhances public spaces and respects symbolic civic buildings and federal icons.
4. Promote and maintain Pennsylvania Avenue between the U.S. Capitol and the White House as a multi-modal street bordered by an actively programmed, lively, pedestrian- oriented public realm that maintains the avenue's important reciprocal views.
5. Maintain the character of the Federal Triangle and the formal design of the National Mall as established in the McMillian Plan.
6. Foster active, enhanced and publicly accessible waterfronts along the Potomac River, Anacostia River, and Washington Channel with unobstructed views to important civic buildings and national icons.
7. Uphold the design of transportation infrastructure that respects viewsheds to symbolic civic buildings and federal icons and does not negatively impact street character.
8. Maintain the prominence of the topographic bowl formed by lowland and rim features of the L'Enfant City and environs by controlling the urban and natural skylines in the Anacostia, Florida Avenue, and Arlington County portions of the bowl as follows:
 - a. Preserve as much as possible the green setting of the Anacostia hills and integrate building masses with, and subordinate to, the natural topography.
 - b. Maintain the Florida Avenue escarpment's natural definition of the L'Enfant Plan boundaries by retaining developments that are fitted to the landforms and by promoting low-rise development that can be distinguished from the greater height of the L'Enfant City's core areas.
 - c. Within the western portion of the bowl, retain a horizontal skyline by relating building heights to the natural slope and rim areas of Arlington Ridge as viewed from the Capitol, the Mall, and other riverside outlooks.
9. Encourage building, street and exterior lighting that respects the hierarchy among memorials, monuments, and important civic buildings and spaces of the nation's capital, with the U.S. Capital being the most prominent feature in the nighttime skyline. Signage, illuminated

billboards and/or other lighting should enhance viewsheds to symbolic civic and federal buildings and should not impact the setting of the National Mall.

The District of Columbia

Critical federal interests extend beyond the L'Enfant City. Major federal land holdings include Rock Creek Park, the National Arboretum, and the U.S. Soldiers and Airmen's Home; each representing areas of federal interest. Additionally, private development throughout the District of Columbia could impact the important setting of the L'Enfant City and affect the horizontal skyline by allowing extraordinarily tall buildings to bump out of the setting and compete with the important iconic buildings within the L'Enfant City. Private development could also affect important views of iconic buildings within the L'Enfant City as well as critical historical street viewsheds if not scaled properly. The policies in this section of the Federal Urban Design Element recognize these as important characteristics outside of the L'Enfant City.

Section B: The District of Columbia Policies

The federal government should implement and support policies and actions that:

1. Encourage building heights that respect symbolic public buildings in the skyline and are proportionate to the streets on which they are located.
2. Maintain or reinforce views to and settings of federal properties in the District of Columbia and to symbolic civic buildings and federal icons within the L'Enfant City.
3. Encourage private development to enhance the character of any adjacent federal facilities or federal park land.

The National Capital Region

The National Capital Planning Act of 1952 establishes NCPC as a federal planning agency with a purview beyond the District of Columbia boundaries. The Commission reviews federal development projects within the National Capital Region and maintains cooperative relationships with jurisdictions throughout the area. Additionally, there are significant federal properties within the region such as The Pentagon complex, Fort Belvoir, the National Institutes of Health and others. There are also important commemorative and historic assets which help establish the region as the setting for the capital city. The approaches to the L'Enfant City through the parkways and other routes establish the gateway character for city and provide the experience of entering into a national capital. The policies established in this section reflect the importance of these resources.

Section C: The National Capital Region policies

The federal government should implement and support policies that:

1. Reinforce the prominence of gateways and the experience of entering Washington by:
 - a. Working with local jurisdictions to ensure the protection and enhancement of gateway routes.
 - b. Regulating the scale and use of nearby development.
 - c. Improving and enhancing gateways with street trees and amenities.
2. Maintain the prominence of federal icons and federal park land by ensuring surrounding development is complementary.
3. Maintain or enhance the characteristics of the National Park Service Parkways by:
 - a. Maintaining parkways as scenic landscape corridors and protecting their historic character.
 - b. Encouraging local jurisdictions to plan and zone development so that it is not visible from parkways.
 - c. Encouraging local jurisdictions to minimize — through planning, regulation, and thoughtful design — the impact of development that is visible from parkways.
 - d. Requiring actions to minimize and mitigate negative impacts to maintain parkway characteristics where transportation system impacts are unavoidable.
4. Preserve the region's tree canopy and expand the region's tree canopy where possible.
5. Enhance and support public access to regional waterfronts along the Potomac River, Anacostia River and other tributaries by:
 - a. Avoiding the creation of physical barriers to the waterfront.
 - b. Determining building height based on the building's proximity to the shoreline.
 - c. Designing and locating bridges so that they minimally affect local riverine habitat, waterways, shorelines, and valleys.

Federal Facilities and Property

How federal facilities are situated and designed plays an important role in establishing the quality of the public realm around them. With a concentration in the downtown area, federal facilities impact the public realm of central Washington. Campus and base facilities such as the National Institute of Health and Ft. Belvoir Virginia impact the quality of their host community. As such, it is critical that federal facilities, whether they are located in an urban or suburban context, address the public space around them. This includes ensuring that their street levels are activated and accessible and do not obstruct public spaces. The designs of the building should fit and engage the context, whether it is a signature location at a terminated vista, or an infill location within a historic fabric of a city center.

The policies established in the following section of the focuses on design issues related to Federal Facilities and Property. The policies are organized into four focus areas which reflect the priorities of federal building design. These include encouraging quality design, enhancing public spaces, activating street levels, and integrating buildings and campuses into their host communities. The policies work in concert with those established in the Federal Environment, Workplace and Historic Preservation Elements, all of which provide direction that should be considered during a facilities design phase.

Inspiring Building Design

The Urban Design Element establishes policies that guide the design of federal buildings, including modernizations, rehabilitations, expansions and new construction. The policies do not endorse any typology of architecture but look to guide how a federal building's outward appearance can enhance the surrounding context. The policies encourage facility designers to fully explore the context of a site's location. Characteristics of the site and its context are critical to an appropriately designed building. These include issues of whether the site is prominent and at the terminus of a viewshed, or if the site is an infill site that is contributing to an overall character of a street corridor. While the design and construction of a federal building should be of a high quality, not all federal buildings have to be iconic in design and the design approach should contribute to a sense of place in an area. Further, in exploring the efficiency and sustainability of a building, designers should explore the opportunities presented from other buildings around it. Combining stormwater management systems or sharing energy generation can minimize design and construction costs and maximize efficiencies. This precinct-level approach to sustainability should also be a core value in designing a high quality federal building.

Section D: Inspiring Building Design Policies

New, redesigned, modernized or refurbished federal buildings should:

1. Reflect their importance in the National Capital Region and be designed and constructed to the highest quality.

2. Complement or improve their context by providing consistency with the adjacent urban fabric. This should include consistency with scale, materials, streetwalls or heights where possible.
3. Implement sustainable site and building design on a precinct level where possible.
4. Achieve a balance between iconic design and infill design as appropriate to the location and setting of the building's site.

Activating Street Levels

A critical component of how a building interacts with the space and character around it is typically determined by how the building engages at the street level. The street level is where the interaction between a building and the people using it, observing it, or passing it occurs. The quality of a building's street level reflects its orientation to the human element. An active and lively street level can inspire a sense of accessibility. It can convey information or artistic qualities. It can also enliven the public spaces around it by providing active uses such as retail or other types of engaging uses. It is the aim of this section of the Urban Design Element to inspire facility designers to rethink the notion of traditional federal building design and look for creative ways to activate the street level and avoid the use of blank walls or obtrusive security elements.

Section E: Activating Street Level Policies

The federal government should:

1. Incorporate publicly accessible retail and/or cultural resources into the street level of federal buildings where possible.
2. Avoid blank walls where a building meets adjacent public space and activate street level facades by utilizing art displays, transparent materials or other appropriate methods. Ensure that buildings are as publicly accessible as possible at the street level. Security measures should be limited and integrated into the public realm. Primary building entrances should be appropriately located in relationship to public space.

Integrating Buildings and Campuses

Within the National Capital Region, the federal government maintains large, multi-structure campus environments as employment centers. Facilities such as Fort Belvoir in, Virginia, National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland or Bolling Air Force Base and St. Elizabeths in the District of Columbia maintain a large presence in the community in which they are located. Their design, particularly as it relates to security and space, tremendously impacts the character of adjacent neighborhoods. This section of the Urban Design Element aims to better integrate these campus environments into their surrounding context. While acknowledging the need for security, the policies encourage the extension of local street, trail and pedestrian

connections through these properties so that continuous local and regional networks can be maintained. These networks can also assist federal employees in walking or biking between campus locations. The policies also acknowledge the importance of locating amenities such as retail or parking facilities in a manner so that they can be used by local residents and not strictly for federal employees. Federal campuses also should consult local plans and design guidelines not only to understand the context in which they are located, but also to strive and meet local directives for signage and overall neighborhood character.

Section F: Integrating Buildings and Campuses Policies

The federal government should:

1. Provide access to or connections through campuses, building yards, plazas, or courtyards for local and regional trails, bikeways, pedestrian ways or open space networks where possible. Agencies should explore programming these areas with publicly accessible amenities such as art installations and/or farmers markets.
2. Provide, to the extent possible, multi-modal street connections or extensions to adjacent streets or local street grid to and through installations to provide a continuous transportation network.
3. Locate and design appropriate amenities including retail and parking facilities so that they are accessible to the local community where possible.
4. Design pedestrian and vehicular entrances or any physical gateways to federal campuses and buildings to be as inviting and as accessible as possible.
5. Consult and respect the design guidelines or goals of the local host community.

Enhancement of Public Spaces

Through the L'Enfant and McMillian Plans, Washington DC has developed the physical framework for high quality public spaces. The squares, circles and open spaces in Washington and the region often play dual roles as not only active park space for local neighborhoods, or lunch time gathering spots for local workers but they also serve as commemorative sites or gathering places for First Amendment expressions. Federal buildings can have a distinct impact on the quality of public spaces around them. Entrances to service areas, perimeter security elements, storm water management systems and other required building infrastructure can be obtrusive to public spaces if not placed and designed appropriately. Public spaces around federal facilities can contribute to an area's vitality by providing seating elements, public art or other activating elements within them. The policies in the Urban Design Element encourage the design of federal buildings and commemorative landscapes so that they activate the public spaces around them and assist in creating a sense of place within an urban area.

Section G: Enhancement of Public Spaces Policies

The federal government should:

1. Minimize public space obstructions such as vehicular curb cuts, orient service areas away from major streets and locate them in the area of least visibility on the site.
2. Provide memorial landscapes that are adaptable and programmed with a balance of active and passive uses and amenities as appropriate to the surrounding context.
3. Provide, where possible, well landscaped areas with active amenities such as seating, public art, educational or commemorative elements or other amenities in public spaces around federal buildings or federal icons.
4. Utilize sustainable features in their landscapes and adjacent public space, where possible.
5. Locate perimeter security elements on the building site and not in the public right-of-way where possible. These elements should be minimized, unobtrusive, and relate to the surrounding context.