

DECISION NOTICE
AND
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE
VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL CENTER

National Park Service

Abstract

The National Park Service (NPS) and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (Fund) prepared and issued an Environmental Assessment (EA) to evaluate the potential impacts of selecting a site for the proposed Vietnam Veterans Memorial Center (Center). The NPS prepared a Summary and Analysis of Public Comments on June 30, 2006, in conjunction with the approval of a site for the Center. The approved site for the Center is located in Northwest Washington, DC at 23rd Street, Henry Bacon Drive, Lincoln Memorial Circle, and Constitution Avenue. The NPS hereby announces its decision to issue a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the design and construction of the Center in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, as amended, the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulations 40 CFR Parts 1500-1508, the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), and NPS Director's Orders (DO) 12 and NPS Management Policies, 2006. The purpose of this Decision Notice and FONSI is to clearly communicate the consideration by the NPS of reasonable alternatives, provide the NPS rationale for selecting the Preferred Alternative, identify mitigation measures that would minimize the identified impacts of the Preferred Alternative and explain the finding that the Preferred Alternative will have no significant environmental impacts on the natural or man-made environment.

November 2007

I. BACKGROUND

The National Park Service (NPS) and Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (Fund) prepared the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Center Site Selection Environmental Assessment (EA) in May 2006, and made the EA available to public and government agencies for a 30-day review and comment period from May 24, 2006 to June 23, 2006. The NPS prepared the EA consistent with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, as amended; the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations implementing NEPA; the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966, as amended; and the NPS Director's Orders (DO) 12 and NPS Management Policies, 2006. The EA assessed the potential environmental impacts associated with the selection of a site for establishment of the proposed Center and evaluated a No Action Alternative. Mitigation measures were recommended for potential impacts identified.

Upon conclusion of the EA public review period, the NPS project team analyzed the scientific and regulatory components of the EA, reviewed the conclusions of the EA, and considered the public comments on the EA. In conjunction with submission of the preferred site (Site A) to the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) for approval the NPS prepared a Summary and Analysis of Public Comments, dated June 30, 2006. NCPC adopted the Site Section EA and issued a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) on July 27, 2006 that was conditioned on mitigation measures adopted as Design Guidelines as well as the requirement that the NPS reconstruct the softball fields lost as a result of this project within ½ mile of Site A. NCPC approved Site A in August 2006 and the Commission of Fine Arts (CFA) adopted identical design guidelines in July 2006, which supplemented its September 2005 approval of the site.

Consistent with NEPA, NPS announces its decision to select the alternative that it will implement for the design and construction of the Center and identify its environmental findings. The purpose of this Decision Notice and FONSI is to clearly communicate consideration by the NPS of reasonable alternatives, provide the NPS rationale for selecting the preferred alternative, identify mitigation measures that minimize the identified impacts of the preferred alternative, and explain the finding that the preferred alternative will have no significant impact or effect on the natural or man-made environment.

II. PROPOSED ACTION

The Fund proposes to establish a center for the existing Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Memorial) in Washington, DC. As stated in the authorizing legislation, Title I of Public Law 108- 126, 117 Stat. 1348, The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center Act, the purpose of the Center is "to better inform and educate the public about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Vietnam War." The Center would provide an opportunity to enhance the visitor experience to the Memorial and would be a resource that helps future generations connect our nation's past with their future. It is intended to be inspirational, educational, and uplifting, a place for healing and reflection.

Congress authorized the Center as an underground facility near the existing Memorial. It is intended that the Center would provide meaning and context, present a personality to the names

on the Wall, and educate current and future generations about the Vietnam War, including its national significance, and the effect of the Wall itself on American culture.

As a result of the site approval by NCPC and CFA, design guidelines were adopted in addition to the mitigation proposed in the EA so that construction of the Center on Site A will not cause significant impacts to the human environment provided that the design concept adhered to those guidelines.

III. AGENCY DECISION

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

CEQ regulations implementing NEPA require a Federal agency to identify the alternative or alternatives that are considered to be environmentally preferable. The process that resulted in identification of an environmentally preferred alternative included preparation of a study of alternative sites, site approval from federal review agencies, and design concept development and approval.

The No Action Alternative would have the fewest impacts to environmental and historical resources. However, this alternative would not meet the underlying purpose and need for the proposed project as it would not satisfy the public law that authorized the establishment of a visitor center near the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Therefore, implementation of one of the two action alternatives is necessary to fulfill the purpose and need of the proposed action.

Of the two alternatives considered in the EA, locating the proposed Center on Site A would have the fewest adverse impacts and the greatest experiential and operational advantages. As a result of constructing the Center on Site A, it would be located near the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, adjacent to the bus drop-off facility, outside of the primary viewsheds along the radial roads to and from the Lincoln Memorial and not within the floodplain. Therefore, construction of the Center on Site A is the environmentally preferred alternative.

Constructing the Center on Site A, directly across Henry Bacon Drive from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, would cluster these related commemorative resources at the west end of the National Mall and enhance the experience of visitors by establishing a visual and physical connection between the Center and the Memorial (Wall), and by locating the Center next to the new visitor service facilities (i.e., the bus drop-off area and the food service kiosk). Construction of the Center on Site A would result in positive impacts on the site and surrounding area on the socio-economic environment and transportation resources. The preferred alternative would result in minor impacts to cultural resources; however, mitigation measures would minimize potential impacts. Therefore, construction of the Center on Site A is the environmentally preferred alternative.

Topography and Landforms: The proposed Center will be located underground to maintain the open character of the grassy area. The existing topography will be subtly recontoured to screen the entry portal to the Center, and take advantage of the existing undulations within the landscape of the parcel. Given the modest size of the entry portal and the recontouring of topography relative to the existing Elm trees, and in consideration of the amount of open space that will continue to characterize the site, the Center will be consistent with the horizontal landscape of the National Mall and help maintain its pastoral quality. As a result, the large existing Elm trees and the Lincoln Memorial beyond will continue to dominate views.

Mitigation: The EA identifies mitigation measures that would minimize potential effects to the historic landscape including: rehabilitation of the historic planting plan to enhance the vista along 23rd Street, minimizing hardscape areas associated with the sloping entrance to the underground building, and assuring that the recontouring is achieved with a maximum height of 10 feet above the current ground plane at its highest point. The project is currently at the site selection stage; additional details and further mitigation measures will be addressed during the design stage.

IV. Additional Issues of Concern

Consideration of Alternatives: The EA contains a range of alternatives. There are three fully developed alternatives: two action alternatives, referred to as Site A and Site G, and a no-action alternative, and five alternatives which after initial study, became alternatives considered but rejected because they did not satisfy the requirements for the project. The reasons were largely related to the quality of the visitor experience and design limitations imposed by the characteristics of the rejected sites. These rejected sites and the reasons for excluding them from further review are outlined in EA Section 2.1.3- Sites Considered but Rejected. The site selection process began in 2003 and included a detailed study of all seven "action" and alternatives, and public and agency review of the potential sites. This process is summarized in the EA in Section 2.1-Site Selection. It was as a result of this process that five sites were dismissed from further analysis in the EA. The five sites were eliminated from consideration as a result of factors relating to visitor experience and design limitations imposed by characteristics of the sites, including a lack of convenient pedestrian access and the absence of a visual connection to the existing Memorial. The sites located across Constitution Avenue from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial at the Interior South Building were also eliminated because the Secretary of the Interior's determined that, due to conflicts with the existing uses in the building, neither the building nor front lawn would be available for the use of the Center. The two remaining sites, Sites A and G, were identified as reasonable action alternatives for further evaluation in the EA along with the no action alternative.

Building Characteristics: The proposed Center will provide emergency egress separate from the primary entry/exit portal. The specific mechanisms will be developed during the design process.

Transportation and Pedestrian Safety: Site A is preferable because it reduces potential conflicts between vehicles and pedestrians. Although the signalized pedestrian crossing of Henry Bacon Drive at Lincoln Memorial Circle is the proposed designated primary route for visitors moving to and from the Center and the Memorial, the NPS and the DC Department of Transportation will

located across Constitution Avenue from the site by providing an additional center dedicated to educating visitors to the National Mall, resulting in positive cumulative impacts.

Planning Controls and Policies: As a result of the compliance with the design guidelines, constructing the Center on Site A would be consistent with applicable federal and local policies including the Federal Elements of the Comprehensive Plan and the Commemorative Works Act of 1986. Site A is not identified as a candidate site in the Memorials and Museums Master Plan. However, because the Center is not a commemorative work and its location in the vicinity of the Memorial was authorized by public law, constructing the Center at this location is not inconsistent with the Master Plan. It is not expected that cumulative impacts on planning policies and controls would result from the construction of the Center on the site.

Community Facilities and Services: The proposed action would slightly reduce the amount of recreational space in the area, resulting in minor impacts on parks and recreational facilities; would add to the cultural space supporting the existing Vietnam Veterans Memorial, resulting in a positive impact, and would allow for a continuous visitor experience between the Center and the Memorial, resulting in a positive impact. Establishment of the Center on Site A would complement the existing cultural and educational experience and would provide a positive impact to this area of the National Mall.

In terms of cumulative impacts, the Center, a new educational facility, would complement the planned United States Institute of Peace headquarters to be located across Constitution Avenue from the site, and by enhancing the overall cultural experience near the western end of the National Mall, resulting in a positive cumulative impact.

Educational Facilities: Locating the Center on Site A would not result in impacts to educational facilities in the surrounding area. However, the addition of the Center would provide a positive impact on the educational experience for visitors to the Center by providing an educational resource to the Memorial.

Visitation: The Center has been designed in a manner that would minimize potential disturbance to the nearby attractions through appropriate orientation and placement within Site A. Placement of the entry/exit point on the eastern side of the site provides a strong connection between the Center and the flagpole plaza of the Memorial, allowing for a continuous visitor experience between the Center and the Memorial. Overall, the visitor experience at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial would be enhanced by locating the Center at Site A.

Cultural Resources

Historic and Visual Resources: Although the Center would be partially visible through the established treeline in peripheral of views from Henry Bacon Drive and 23rd Street, overall the effects to historic vistas would be minor due to the screening of the site by the historic trees at its perimeter and because the Center is located underground. Constructing the Center at Site A would result in adverse effects to the Lincoln Memorial grounds by altering the parcel's recreational use as identified in the Lincoln CLR. Adverse effects would be minimized, however, by the construction of the building underground, such that the parcel would continue to

appear from most vantage points as an open grass panel. Effects could be further mitigated by maintaining a portion of the site for recreation. The construction of the Center on Site A would not alter the historic roadways that border the site, or the historic sidewalks that encircle it.

Construction of the Center on Site A would have minor effects on the elements of the L'Enfant and McMillan plans. The most important designated vista is the main mall axis from the U.S. Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial. The vistas along the radial roads to and from the Lincoln Memorial are identified as contributing elements. However, the Center is not visible from the east-west axis and is slightly visible in peripheral views from the radial roads. Overall the effects would be minor due to the screening of the site by the historic trees at its perimeter and because the Center is located underground.

Construction of the Center on Site A would not adversely affect the West Potomac Park Historic District or the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Overall, effects would be minor, due to the screening of the site by the historic trees at its perimeter and the construction of the Center underground which would generally maintain the historic character of West Potomac Park as a horizontal grassy plain beneath the high canopied trees. Construction of the Center would have no visual effect on the buildings fronting on Constitution Avenue, particularly the American Pharmacists Association, because the filtered views of the Center are screened by existing vegetation which will be increased through the planting of the missing elm trees along Constitution Avenue.

Although the construction of the Center on Site A would alter the view to and from the Lincoln Memorial slightly, it would not change the quality of the view, due to the fact that the Center would be primarily underground and would be oriented to the east. To the extent that portions of the Center would be slightly visible from the Lincoln Memorial, that impact will be mitigated by the restoration of the four rows of elm trees included in the historic landscape plan along Lincoln Memorial Circle as well as the missing elm trees along Constitution Avenue, which will screen views of the Center. The Center would not be visible in the view from the Lincoln Memorial to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial or from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to the Lincoln Memorial.

Transportation Resources

Traffic and Roadways: The recent roadway improvements constructed on Memorial Circle, 23rd Street and Henry Bacon Drive, while not implemented specifically in connection with the proposed Center, will complement the access needs of Site A extremely well. Vehicular traffic volumes and patterns within the area will not change as a result of the Center being constructed at Site A. The bus drop-offs on Henry Bacon Drive and Constitution Avenue will serve the Center.

Pedestrian Circulation: The signalized pedestrian crossing of Henry Bacon Drive at Memorial Circle would be the designated primary route for visitors moving to and from the Center and the Memorial and would provide safe pedestrian linkages between the Center and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and other memorials to the east and south within the National Mall. The signalized pedestrian crossings of Constitution Avenue that are located at 22nd and 23rd Streets

would provide safe pedestrian linkages between the Center and visitors arriving from north of Constitution Avenue. In addition, as a result of a comment from the District of Columbia Department of Transportation (DDoT) on the EA, the NPS and DDoT will evaluate whether a signalized mid-block crossing of Henry Bacon Drive would add another viable pedestrian linkage between the Center and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Development of Site A for the Center will include wayfinding signage to inform and organize pedestrian movements to and from the Center.

Physical Resources

Geophysical Resources: Development of Site A for the Center would require slight grade changes to the existing topography of the site to accommodate the construction of an underground facility. The topography on the east side of the site would be graded to slope gradually to the entrance of the Center in order to provide universally accessible walkways. Because the maximum depth of the Center would not reach bedrock, it will be constructed within a slurry wall. Overall, site preparation and construction activities would have minor impacts on soils due to soil disturbance.

Vegetation and Wildlife: A tree protection zone would be established during construction activities so that there will be no impact on the existing elm trees and their critical root zones. No part of the building footprint would be within the drip line of the trees. Site A contains a large, central area that could accommodate the construction of an underground building and required grading without affecting the existing elm trees on the site. Therefore, the use of Site A for the purpose of the Center would not result in impacts on vegetation.

Floodplains: Site A is not located within the 100-year floodplain and the Center has been located on the site so that it is not within the 500-year floodplain. Because the Center is not within the floodplain, no further compliance with Executive Order 11988 is required.

V. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

This project has undergone substantial agency coordination and public involvement. With respect to NEPA, this EA was made available for public review and comment from May 24 to June 23, 2006. The EA was published on the NPS web site and a press release announcing the document's availability was published in a local newspaper. The EA was distributed to Federal and District of Columbia agencies as well as interested citizen organizations. The NPS prepared a Summary and Analysis of Public Comments on the EA in June 2006, which is attached for reference.

As a result of the adoption of design guidelines by CFA and NCPC and their direction that the NPS enter into early consultation during design development as a condition of the approval of Site A, three design studies were developed to permit the review agencies and consulting parties an opportunity to provide early comment on which alternative best met the design guidelines. The design studies incorporated the underlying concepts of the spatial organization of the exhibit space and courtyard that provides the means of introducing natural light below grade and providing the mechanical systems without penetration of the ground plane. All three of the

design studies were based on the criteria of 14 feet of vertical height between the entrance and the level of the grass on the roof, derived from the necessary construction depths for a planted roof combined with an acceptable ceiling height at the entry. The principal variations among the alternatives centered on the relationship of the 14-foot vertical height and the nature of the approach pathways. In order for the ramp to be universally accessible from the sidewalks, its total length is required to be 280 feet long to provide a slope of 1 foot in 20.

Design Alternative A gently regraded a portion of the site to a height of approximately seven feet above the existing grade to permit universally accessible pathways from the sidewalk of Henry Bacon Drive to the entrance of the Center, yielding a ramp of 140 feet at a slope of 1 foot in 20. Design Alternative B maintained the grade of the site and employed a 280-foot long switch-back ramp to provide a universally accessible pathway to the entrance which was 14 feet below the existing grade. Design Alternative C also maintained the grade of the site but incorporated the pathway system into the landscape rather than as part of the courtyard. This alternative included two pathways, one from Henry Bacon Drive which joined the 280-foot pathway from Constitution Avenue at 22nd Street to provide much less constricted universal pathway to the entrance 14 feet below the existing grade. The consensus among CFA, NCPC, DCHPO and the consulting parties was that Design Alternative A or any alternative that mounded the grade of the site resulted in too great an impact and did not meet the design guidelines. Additionally, Design Alternative B was deemed to be unsuccessful in providing access to the Center that would accommodate the number of visitors entering and exiting the Center at one time. Thus, Design Alternative C was selected for detailed development into the design concept for submission to CFA and NCPC for approval. CFA approved the design concept on October 18, 2007.

VI. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES AND MITIGATION

Design guidelines were established jointly by NCPC and CFA in 2006 to mitigate otherwise significant impacts of the site selection. While further refinements will be made to the design concept as it undergoes additional review, the mitigations required by design guidelines have been achieved. Therefore, the preferred alternative will have no significant impact on the natural or man-made environment.

1. *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 the axial viewsheds of 23rd Street, NW and Henry Bacon Drive, NW.*

Response: The entire Visitor Center is designed to be underneath the level of existing grades. The roof of the structure is planted with grass so that the building exists underground. Since the design concept is based on maintaining existing grade, there are minimal if any disruptions to the historic axial viewsheds along Henry Bacon and 23rd Streets. Likewise, the views from the Lincoln Memorial steps and podium are minimally affected. Each of these viewsheds has, to the best of the design team's ability, been simulated and depicted for review.

Further, additional plantings will restore the historic tree planting pattern and canopy as envisioned in 1921 and implemented over time, and detailed in the Lincoln Memorial Grounds CLR and further mitigate the concept design.

- 2. 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, will not interfere with or encroach upon the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.*

Response: Visual simulations have been accomplished to address the visibility of the center from the pathways of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Due to heavy foliage, the traffic on Henry Bacon Drive, the bus drop-off, and the distance between the Memorial and the center's entrance, there is little visibility of the center at all. In addition, the downward sloping ramps at the Memorial have a resultant effect of lowering visitor sight lines, making any view to the center across the street from the Memorial virtually impossible.

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

Response: The design concept of the center is based on maintaining the existing grade, generally described as the plane formed by the series of level lines between the two opposite east-west elevations of existing sidewalk along 23rd Street, NW and Henry Bacon Drive. The project does not propose to raise existing grade, but instead incorporates only gradual slopes downward, which are related either to the approach to the center's entry, or as a result of the need for "ha-ha" earth berms to shield views of guard walls around the courtyard area. Gentle transitions between the flat planes of grass and sloped ones will be incorporated into the design concept.

The slope into the existing grade, is gradual, providing universal access without the need for extensive ramps. All sloped grades are limited to a maximum incline of 2 units horizontal to 1 unit vertical to accommodate lawn area.

- 4. 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.*

Response: The design concept has been configured such that no substantial area of directly illuminated surfaces is within the critical sightlines as described within the mitigating guidelines. The majority of the surfaces of the center which face the Lincoln Memorial are opaque, and therefore little, if any, light spill is anticipated. Views from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to the site are extremely limited, particularly due to the tree cover, distance, and low viewing angles from the sloping ramps. Likewise, the majority of the sidewalk length along Constitution Avenue does not afford a view of any vertical glass surfaces of the project. In addition the interior lighting level of the center is intended to be

quite low to accommodate the exhibits, and as a result, little light is expected to be transmitted through transparent or translucent glass surfaces.

Full compliance of this mitigation will be presented in more detail during design development when a lighting concept for the interior space has been developed, and evening lighting conditions at the site have been studied and can be simulated. It is not the intent to have the center open after dark.

5. *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.*

Response: No protrusions above the level of existing grade are proposed. All building elements are at or below this level.

6. *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.*

Response: Though no site lighting has yet been designed, there is no anticipated need to provide site lighting beyond the minimal amount required for public safety. The center is expected to be in operation during the day only, and shall have only low level site lighting to allow pedestrian circulation along entry paths. Full compliance with this mitigating guideline will be studied and presented in more detail during design development.

7. *The Visitor Center's design will provide only the paved area necessary for visitors to enter and exit the building. The design will not include additional paved area for gathering space or queuing.*

Response: The design concept includes only the minimum necessary paved area for the number of expected visitors to the center. The majority of the exterior paving accommodates the ramping approach walks from Henry Bacon Drive and Constitution Avenue and the entry stair from Henry Bacon Drive.

8. *The project will not include new vehicle parking areas.*

Response: No new vehicle parking areas are included or proposed as part of the project.

9. *The Visitor Center will have a single entrance for both visitors and service.*

Response: The entries for both service and visitors are combined at the same point, and are recessed via the same site approach. No loading dock is required as part of the facility. Holding spaces for daily trash removal and incoming exhibit related materials are incorporated within the building envelope such that no exterior service enclosures are required.

10. *The Visitor Center's associated pedestrian street crossing points will be designed to address traffic impacts effectively and to protect pedestrian safety.*

Response: Pedestrian street crossing points will occur at existing signaled intersections, at the traffic light on Henry Bacon Drive at Lincoln Memorial Circle, and the other at the traffic light on Henry Bacon Drive at Constitution Avenue. Third and fourth crossing opportunities can utilize the signal and crosswalks at 22nd and 23rd Streets and Constitution Avenue.

No additional street crossings are being proposed. Though no mid-block crossing on Henry Bacon Drive currently exists, the National Park Service is open to the recommendations of the Commissions and the DDoT.

11. *The Visitor Center will be constructed only on the portion of the site that lies outside of the critical root zones 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.*

Response: The footprint of the center's construction zone lie outside the critical root zone of the existing perimeter trees.

12. *The project will place new landscaping on the site in accordance with the National Park Service's Cultural Landscape Report for the Lincoln Memorial reference in the Environmental Assessment and will maintain the open grass panels on the site surrounded at the site's perimeter by elm trees.*

Response: The proposed design concept incorporates a landscape design that is in accordance with the Lincoln Memorial Grounds CLR. Grass panels are maintained, and the project proposes to plant new elm trees that are now missing from the site's perimeter.

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

Response: A significant area of the site remains open and available for multi-purpose recreation.

14. *The Visitor Center will be designed without guardrails or perimeter security elements.*

Response: No perimeter security elements are proposed in the design concept. Guard walls are incorporated at the perimeter edge of the courtyard. Combined with perimeter grading, and a curb, these portions of the structure do not protrude above the level of existing finished grade.

On August 24, 2007, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) was advised of the NPS determination pursuant to 36 CFR 800.5(a)(1) that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Center may result in an adverse effect on historic properties within the Area of Potential Effects for Historic Resources and invited the ACHP to participate in the consultation process and ACHP

agreed to participate on September 10, 2007. Consulting parties have been identified and section 106 consultation meetings were held on September 12 and October 24, 2007 to afford the opportunity to comment on the design concept for the Center. For purposes of Section 106, the NPS intends to seek the concurrence of the DCHPO that the adverse effects would be mitigated through conformance with the design guidelines adopted in 2006.

VII. IMPAIRMENT OF PARK RESOURCES OR VALUES

In addition to determining the environmental consequences of the preferred alternative, NPS Management Policies, 2006, and Director's Order 12 require analysis of potential impacts to determine if the proposed action would impair park resources.

The fundamental purpose of the National Park System, established by the Organic Act and reaffirmed by the General Authorities Act, as amended, begins with a mandate to conserve park resources and values. NPS managers must always seek ways to avoid or minimize to the greatest degree practicable adverse impacts on park resources and values. However, these laws do give NPS managers discretion to allow impacts to park resources and values when necessary and appropriate to fulfill the purposes of a park, as long as the impact does not constitute impairment of the affected resources and values. Although Congress has given NPS managers discretion to allow certain impacts within parks, that discretion is limited by the statutory requirement that the NPS must leave park resources and values unimpaired, unless a particular law directly and specifically provides otherwise. The prohibited impairment is an impact that, in the professional judgment of the responsible NPS manager, would harm the integrity of park resources or values, including opportunities that otherwise would be present for the enjoyment of those resources or values. An impact to any park resource or value may constitute impairment. However, an impact would more likely constitute an impairment to the extent it affects a resource or value whose conservation is necessary to fulfill specific purposes identified in the establishing legislation or proclamation of the park; key to the natural or cultural integrity of the park or to opportunities for enjoyment of the park; or identified as a goal in the park's general management plan or other relevant NPS planning document.

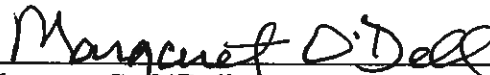
In addition to reviewing the significance of selecting Site A for the proposed Center, I, as Superintendent of National Mall and Memorial Parks, have determined that implementation of the preferred alternative will not constitute an impairment of the Park's resources and values. This conclusion is based on a thorough analysis of the impacts described in the EA, the agency and public comments received, and the professional judgment of the decision-maker in accordance with NPS Management Policies, 2006. As described in the EA, the implementation of the preferred alternative will not result in major adverse impacts to a resource of value whose conservation is (1) necessary to fulfill specific purposes identified in the establishing legislation of the park system of the nation's capital; (2) key to the natural or cultural integrity of the parklands; and (3) identified as a goal in the park's general management plan or other relevant National Park Service planning documents.

VIII. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

This FONSI is based on the EA for the Vietnam Visitors Center Site Selection. As previously identified, NPS prepared the document to fulfill the requirements of NEPA, NHPA, DO-12 and NPS Management Policies, 2006. Consistent with these regulatory requirements, the EA addresses short-term construction-related impacts and long-term changes to existing environmental conditions under the alternatives, as well as the cumulative impacts that would result from this and other proposed projects in the area.

The NPS has fully evaluated the information and analysis contained in the EA, and has considered comments on the EA received from the public, reviewing agencies, and others. On the basis on these considerations, the NPS has determined the EA adequately and accurately addresses the environmental issues and impacts of the proposed project. The NPS has further evaluated and selected the Site A Alternative as the preferred alternative using the criteria of 40 CFR § 1508.27 to determine the significance of the proposed action by examining its context and intensity. On this basis, the NPS has determined that the preferred alternative for construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center on Site A does not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment and that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required.

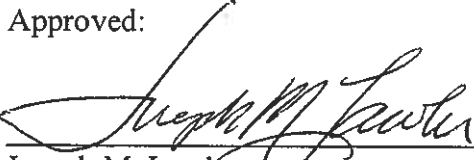
Recommended:



Margaret G. O'Dell
Superintendent
National Mall and Memorial Parks

Date 11/1/07

Approved:



Joseph M. Lawler
Regional Director
National Capital Region, National Park Service

Date 11/1/07

**Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center
Environmental Assessment
NPS Summary and Analysis of Public Comments
June 30, 2006**

The NPS received comments on the Environmental Assessment (EA) from 9 agencies, organizations or individuals, including the National Capital Planning Commission and the District of Columbia Department of Transportation. The comments addressed a range of issues including the need for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Center, consideration of alternatives, public input in the site selection process, transportation and pedestrian circulation, characteristics of the building, mitigation requirements, floodplain, impacts on recreational space, potential cumulative impacts and consultation under Section 106. After careful review of the comments, we believe that all the issues that are raised by these comments have been addressed in the EA. We have organized the comments into the sections listed below. The original comments appear at the end of this summary. Our response to the comments follows below.

I. Project Authorization

Purpose and Need: Establishment of the Center is guided by specific legislation enacted by the Congress that states: "the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, Inc., is authorized to construct a visitor center at or near the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on Federal land in the District of Columbia, or its environs ... in order to better inform and educate the public about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Vietnam War." The Congressional action also requires: the Center to be located underground; the Fund to consult with appropriate agencies and the public during the development of the center; and "landscaped in a manner harmonious with the site of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and consistent with the special nature and sanctity of the Mall." The legislation also provided that no visitor centers at other memorials on the National Mall could be constructed.

The proposed action is the selection and approval of a site for the purpose of establishing a Center for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. It is being established pursuant to its authorizing legislation and the Commemorative Works Act. The Center would provide an opportunity to enhance the visitor experience to the Memorial and educate visitors about the Vietnam War and the significance of the sacrifices made by those who served.

Project Responsibilities: Within the process established by Congress, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF) and the Secretary of the Interior (accomplished through the National Park Service) are responsible for establishing the Center, including its design. The design development is accomplished through approval by the Commission of Fine Arts (CFA), the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPA), and consultation with the District of Columbia Historic Preservation Officer (DCSHPO).

The NPS manages the site proposed for the Center and will manage the facility upon its completion and acceptance by the NPS. The VVMF, as sponsor of the Center, is in partnership with the NPS, and ultimately has to request a construction permit from the NPS. The VVMF is a

non-profit organization established for the purpose of bringing honor and recognition to the men and women who served and sacrificed their lives in Vietnam, and was authorized by Congress to build a national memorial dedicated to all veterans of the Vietnam War.

Project Guidance: As directed by Congress, the Center will be an underground facility. The entry portal would be located within the existing topography of the site in a manner that recontours the grade to make it compliant with applicable accessibility requirements, resulting in a subtle mound no higher than 10 feet above the existing grade at its highest point. Re-grading of the site will allow for the topography to conceal the underground facility, and allow for the entry portal to be positioned outside of critical views.

Preferred Alternative: Site A, which is located directly across from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, has been identified as the preferred site for the underground Center. The EA identifies design constraints intended to guide the development of the building and its associated landscaping at the preferred site. The design of the building will be developed in accordance with the approved design guidelines. The site selection has undergone public and agency review, which will continue through the design stage of the project.

II. Summary of Review Status

Public Input: The proposed Center has been discussed in six meetings before the public, including a public meeting in February 2005 during which a full explanation of the site analysis was presented, and a public meeting in June 2005 during which NPS provided an opportunity for public comment on the site selection. The proposed Center was also discussed with the public at several meetings of the National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission as well as public meetings of CFA and NCPC.

As part of the preparation of this EA, the NPS consulted extensively with government agencies, public organizations, and interested stakeholders. In particular, both CEQ and NCPC have provided guidance on the environmental review of the sites. The U.S. Congress has also expressed interest in this project. The NPS also provided for public review of the EA, including a facilitated review meeting for the EA in June 2006. Subsequent to the EA process, NCPC and CFA will continue their review and approval roles on the proposed Center, including developing design guidelines. NPS will make decisions regarding the site and design of the Center based on the entire review process.

The NPS formally initiated National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 consultation on the proposed Center with the DCSHPO in February 2005. The NPS held a Section 106 informational meeting in May 2005. It was agreed during this meeting that the ongoing Section 106 consultation process would be completed during the design stage. The NPS will respond to request for consulting party status as part of the next stages of the Section 106 consultation process.

Project Review: The purpose of the EA is to assess and mitigate the environmental consequences of the proposed action relating to the selection of a site for the Center; it is not intended to serve as a design review document. Therefore, in accordance with NEPA, the EA

documents the potential effects of the proposed Center, provides project parameters to anticipate the potential design, and acknowledges that the design will undergo numerous reviews prior to final approval by CFA and NCPC.

As provided for in the Commemorative Works Act, the NPS, NCPC, and CFA may respectively develop design guidelines at the time of site approval. When the CFA approved Site A, they declined to establish design guidelines. The NPS and NCPC will each respectively develop site approval criteria for use in their decision-making. These criteria will likely be formalized as mitigation measures that will be conditions of approval for the preferred site.

Subsequent to the site selection process, the Visitor Center will enter a design development stage. The resulting concept, schematic and final designs will undergo a thorough design review process to obtain approval by NPS, NCPC, and CFA. Key issues to be addressed in the design phase will be the placement and treatment of the entry portal, the profile of the recontoured topography, and details regarding the proposed light well and support functions.

III. Clarification of Landscape Analysis

Vistas and Views: The historic planting plans for the Lincoln Memorial that were developed by Henry Bacon and Irving Payne in the early 20th Century were intended to frame and accentuate specific views to and from the Lincoln Memorial. Major and minor views to and from the Lincoln Memorial are identified on page 85 of the Cultural Landscape Report (CLR): major vistas include the east-west axis and minor vistas include those along radial roads extending from the Lincoln Memorial. "As defined in the 1791 L'Enfant plan and subsequent McMillan Commission Plan of 1901, the most important designed vista is the main mall axis, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial east to the Washington Monument and then from the Capitol to the Washington Monument to the Lincoln." The vistas from radial roads to the Lincoln Memorial and along radial roads from the Lincoln Memorial are identified as contributing features in the CLR. These vistas are illustrated on Map 10 of the CLR and included on page 3-16 of the EA.

The American Elm tree plantings along radial roads frame the views toward the Memorial, as well as define the perimeter of the grass panels. The grass panels of both Sites A and G are part of the Lincoln Memorial Circle and Radial Roads component landscape. Lincoln Memorial Circle and radial roads vegetation help define the spatial composition of the tree canopy and location of the open grassy areas. Development of the Center as an underground facility on Site A will ensure that the perimeter trees will continue to frame the axial views, as identified in the CLR. While the tree canopy established by the rows of Elm trees along the radial roads afford views into the proposed Center site, tertiary views across the grass panels to the Lincoln Memorial were not identified as contributing features in the CLR.

Memorial Plantings: Bacon's original concept for vegetation at the Lincoln Memorial intended for the Memorial to be visible in specific locations by means of openings in the encircling foliage. The plantings were to be placed in clusters along the base, outlining the Memorial, while allowing views to the Memorial from six different monumental approaches. The Memorial was not intended to be viewed across the grassy panels.

Preferred Alternative

The NPS has selected construction of the Center on Site A as the preferred alternative. Site A is located on the National Mall, within the West Potomac Park Historic District and the Lincoln Memorial Circle and radial roads component landscape of the Lincoln Memorial grounds, approximately 325 feet west of the existing Vietnam Veterans Memorial. It is administered by the NPS. The site is an open grass panel of approximately 5.2 acres in size which was constructed to rise gently in elevation toward the Lincoln Memorial. It is surrounded by rows of American elms along Constitution Avenue, 23rd Street, Henry Bacon Drive, and Lincoln Memorial Circle.

The central portion of the site situated within the trees that line the perimeter, includes a 2.5-acre area that could accommodate the Center without conflicts with the NPS visitor facilities, i.e. the NPS concessions kiosk and bus drop-off area on Henry Bacon Drive. The balance of the site is currently used for recreational activities. The site is surrounded by historic American elm trees and is visible from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial flagpole plaza which has been identified as the main entrance point to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF THE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

Construction of the Center on Site A is not expected to result in significant adverse impacts on socio-economic resources, cultural resources, transportation resources, or physical resources in the area surrounding the site. The potential positive and negative environmental impacts associated with construction of the Center on Site A, as documented in the EA, are summarized below. Where no mention is made of impacts for a given resource area, there were no substantive issues of concern attributable to Alternative Site A.

Socio-Economic Environment

Land Use: Construction of the Center on Site A would result in the displacement of the two ballfields that currently exist on the site. However, as a result of the placement of the Center on the site, a portion of the site would continue to be used as a multi-use recreational field, as well as a gathering space. The overall use of the site would change from softball fields to a combination of cultural/educational and multi-purpose recreation. Maintaining the recreational use of the site would be consistent with the recommendations stated in the NPS Lincoln Memorial Grounds Cultural Landscape Report (CLR). In order to mitigate the loss of the ballfields, the NPS will establish multi-purpose fields south of Independence Avenue and west of the proposed Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial, in accordance with its current practice of not dedicating recreational fields to a single sport.

Although the construction of the Center would result in the loss of a small portion of the existing active recreational space, use of Site A for the Center would complement and contribute to the cultural character of the surrounding area. The addition of this new educational facility would complement the planned United States Institute of Peace and Public Education Center to be

evaluate whether mid-block crossing is a more viable solution as well as to address specific concerns during the design process.

Floodplains: Site A is not located within the 100-year floodplain and the Center would be placed to avoid the 500-year floodplain. In addition, the Center will be constructed with measures to prevent flooding. The NPS will comply with Executive Order 11988 and evaluate the potential effects of the center on the floodplain as well as proposed mitigation. The required statement of findings will be prepared prior to conclusion of compliance.

Cumulative Impacts: Existing and reasonably foreseeable projects are intrinsic elements of the contextual environment for a given project. Therefore, by definition, the evaluation of potential impacts that would be generated by the proposed Center on its affected environment includes an assessment of cumulative impacts. Furthermore, certain relatively recent projects, such as the World War II Memorial and security improvements to other memorials, are part of the existing conditions of the area as much as long-standing and historic memorials and landscape improvements

Specific to on-going projects, the cumulative impacts that may result from the NPS visitor service kiosks were considered as part of the Lincoln Memorial Circle Rehabilitation and Security Improvements project, which was identified and described on page 1-11 of the EA. The kiosk was an integral part of the analyses of potential impacts relating to land use, community facilities and services, visitor experience, visual resources, roadways and traffic patterns, and pedestrian circulation.

Impacts on Recreation Space: Establishment of the Center at Site A will displace two dedicated ball fields; however, the recreational space will be maintained as informal multi-purpose fields without fenced backstops and worn base paths, allowing for greater flexibility in the recreational use of this area.