

U.S. COMMISSION OF FINE ARTS

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401 F STREET NW SUITE 312 WASHINGTON DC 20001-2728 202-504-2200 FAX 202-504-2195 WWW.CFA.GOV

23 March 2018

Dear Mr. Vogel:

In its meeting of 15 March, the Commission of Fine Arts reviewed a revised site selection presentation on three potential locations for the proposed National Desert Storm and Desert Shield Memorial: Walt Whitman Park at 20th and E Streets, NW; West Potomac Park at 23rd Street and Constitution Avenue, NW; and the Belvedere at the historic Potomac River terminus of Constitution Avenue. Commending the project team for its thorough analysis of each site, the Commission approved the Belvedere site as the option that presents the greatest opportunity for a heroic national memorial to the Desert Storm and Desert Shield conflict.

The Commission members emphasized that their role is to assess the proposed sites in relation to the larger design of Washington's monumental core and its existing memorials, and they reiterated their strong support for a highly prominent site for this new memorial. They agreed that the memorial should make a powerful statement for all Americans in representing both the transition from the geopolitics of the Cold War to the conflicts of the 21st century, and a national shift in the honoring of war veterans by the American public; they advised that the best site would convey a story that furthers the understanding of the Desert Shield and Desert Storm conflict as a significant pivot point in American history.

In their discussion of the three sites, the Commission members reiterated their concern that the western end of the National Mall—most notably identified with the Lincoln Memorial—is being increasingly developed as a landscape of military commemoration, rather than maintaining its intended original use of public recreation and civic prospect. Regarding the memorial project team's preferred alternative at 23rd Street and Constitution Avenue, they advised that the visual presence of any memorial in this location would have to be minimized in order to respect the setting of the Lincoln Memorial, whose surroundings should remain unobstructed. Recalling the arduous review process for the planned Vietnam Veterans Memorial education center located on an adjacent site, which required a largely underground design, they anticipated that a new memorial at the 23rd Street location would need to be low and hidden within trees, obscured from view and dependent upon signage to draw Mall visitors to this location. They also noted that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial itself would not actually be visible from this site, and any understanding of a linear relationship between the two memorials would only be made possible by reading a map or diagram. They emphasized that a memorial here would have to rely on the shaping of the landscape rather than vertical elements such as flagpoles or high walls, and they questioned whether such a subtle form of commemoration would satisfy the memorial association's intent to create a prominent design worthy of its subject.


For the alternative of Walt Whitman Park on E Street, NW, they observed that this site has the potential to participate in a celebratory and honorific axis linking the proposed World War I Memorial at Pershing Park with the White House and the Kennedy Center. They noted that the National Mall encompasses President's Park and the White House Grounds, and they

stressed that rather than being isolated, the E Street site is proximate to the National Mall in addition to many civic buildings and landscapes.

In comparison, the Commission members found that the advantages offered by the Belvedere site—at the historic terminus of Constitution Avenue at the Potomac River—would provide the best opportunity for the National Desert Storm and Desert Shield Memorial to express the historic significance of the conflict it would commemorate. They observed that the Belvedere is one of the most important remaining memorial sites in the monumental core and, unlike the 23rd Street site, it has the potential for a memorial comprising a striking expression of vertical elements, including the display of thirty-four flags representing the coalition of countries that supported the Desert Storm military intervention. Consequently, a memorial in this location could be highly visible from the west end of the Mall, the Potomac River, and Memorial Bridge, as well as many areas in Virginia, including Arlington National Cemetery, the Pentagon, and the George Washington Memorial Parkway. It would also be visible to many recreational cyclists, joggers, pedestrians, and boaters. Although the site is currently constrained by an array of existing roads, its selection for a prominent memorial at the terminus of the Constitution Avenue axis could inform plans currently under discussion to improve its accessibility. In conclusion, the Commission recommended that the Belvedere provides an appropriate site for an uplifting national memorial that would valorize the veterans of Desert Storm and Desert Shield.

The Commission looks forward to further review of this important national memorial as designs are developed. As always, the staff is available to assist you with the next submission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. Luebke', written in a cursive style.

Thomas E. Luebke, FAIA
Secretary

Robert Vogel, Regional Director
National Park Service, National Capital Region
1100 Ohio Drive, SW
Washington, DC 20242

cc: Randy Schumacher, CSO Architects
Skip Graffam, The Olin Studio
Scott Stump, National Desert Storm Memorial Association
Marcel Acosta, National Capital Planning Commission