

Rock Creek Park

Nature Center Complex Development Concept Plan

Newsletter Update #2, November 2017

U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service



Rock Creek Horse Center

Rock Creek Park Nature Center Complex Development Concept Plan

Thank you for your continued involvement in the Development Concept Plan/Environmental Assessment (DCP/EA) for the Nature Center Complex of Rock Creek Park. This plan includes the Rock Creek Park Nature Center, Rock Creek Park Horse Center, maintenance area, and immediate surroundings. The plan identifies necessary improvements to buildings, picnic areas, and trails. In addition, the plan provides the National Park Service and its stakeholders with direction to renovate buildings, further protect park resources, and create more opportunities to explore and learn in the park. It also addresses how to support ongoing operations and maintenance.

Back in November 2016, we invited your feedback on preliminary alternative concepts for the Nature Center Complex of Rock Creek Park. We received many helpful comments and suggestions and we thank all participants for the time invested in your responses and the passion displayed for your public lands. Most comments focused on the Horse Center, birding opportunities, and maintaining or improving the natural surroundings of the Nature Center Complex. The full comment report, the previous newsletter, and the project plan can be found on-line at parkplanning.nps.gov/ROCRDCP. We have revised the alternative concepts based on your input. A summary of the changes can be found on page 4 of this newsletter.

We invite you to attend a public open house and share ideas and questions about the updated alternative concepts found in this newsletter during the 30-day public comment period. Specifically, please share your thoughts on the following question: Do you have any ideas, concerns, or questions about the concepts in this newsletter?

Your comments will be considered by park staff as we further refine the concepts and evaluate the environmental impacts.

You may provide your comments at the meeting via a comment card, via the project website at parkplanning.nps.gov/ROCRDCP, or by writing to:

Superintendent, Rock Creek Park
Attention: ROCR DCP
3545 Williamsburg Lane, NW
Washington, DC 20008

Please provide comments by December 15, 2017

JOIN US AT A PUBLIC OPEN HOUSE!

11/15/2017 Open house from 6:30pm to 8:00pm
Short presentation at 7:00pm
Rock Creek Park Nature Center and Planetarium
5200 Glover Rd, NW, Washington, DC 20015

For further information or if you have special needs to be accommodated during this public open house, please contact Anetris Campbell at 202-895-6004.

PURPOSE AND NEED

Purpose

The purpose of the DCP is to provide guidance for the improvement and management of high-priority buildings and other facilities in the Nature Center Complex of Rock Creek Park. The Nature Center Complex includes the Nature Center and Planetarium, Horse Center area, maintenance area, and the immediate surroundings, including picnic areas #13 and #14 and nearby trails. The proposed improvements would protect park resources and enhance visitor experience while ensuring that the long-term costs of implementation, operations, and maintenance are feasible for the National Park Service within its available financial resources.

Need

The facilities within the Nature Center Complex currently do not meet the needs of park visitors and staff. These facilities require a number of upgrades for code compliance purposes, including improvements for physical and programmatic accessibility, fire suppression, and electrical and mechanical system upgrades. The current configuration of the nature center, a contributing resource to the Rock Creek Park National Register Historic District, does not make optimal use of its existing square footage and limits its use for community gatherings and potential revenue generation.

The Nature Center also has flooding issues which need resolution. Similarly, buildings and spaces in the maintenance area would benefit from improved configuration of work spaces, with the potential to eventually house consolidated park offices and operations. Buildings and spaces at the Horse Center do not adequately house and support the horses, concessioner, and visitors. Navigation around the Nature Center Complex is challenging for visitors and would benefit from improved signage.

In addition, the facilities in the Nature Center Complex currently have a deferred maintenance backlog in excess of \$4 million, as well as forecasted future capital needs of approximately \$8 million. This plan outlines a series of targeted capital improvements that would revitalize these facilities and the project area to address needed repairs and deficiencies, extend their lifespans, and lower the total cost of facility ownership. Improvements would be financed within the constraints of available project funds from the National Park Service and its partner groups.

Financial Strategy

The National Park Service is developing a financial strategy to support the implementation of the plan's proposed actions. The financial strategy would address deferred maintenance and seek to reduce long-term operating costs at the Nature Center, Horse Center, and maintenance area. Projects proposed in the alternative concepts would be completed in phases over the next 10 to 20 years.



Images from top to bottom:

1. Picnic Area #13
2. Nature Center
3. Downy Woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*)
4. Maintenance Yard



Images from top to bottom:

1. Junior Ranger Camp
2. Birdwatching
3. Salamander
4. Nature Center exhibits

OBJECTIVES

Through this planning effort, Rock Creek Park strives to meet the following objectives.

Interpretation and Education

Reimagine and update interpretation and education to increase relevance for current and future visitors, including those from neighboring communities. Serve as a window into the natural world for both residents and visitors in Washington, DC.

Public Use and Enjoyment

Allow visitors opportunities to learn about and enjoy the area by maintaining current recreational uses. Expand and enhance site amenities, address visitor safety concerns, and make necessary accessibility improvements for rehabilitated buildings and trails.

Access and Circulation

Enhance and improve access to wayfinding to and within the Nature Center area to improve the visitor experience and better connect the park to adjacent communities.

Park Operations

Update the maintenance area to improve the efficiency of park operations and enhance park staff safety, well-being, and communications. Reduce deferred maintenance throughout the project area, explore opportunities to reduce the total park facility footprint, and balance long-term operational costs of the nature center area facilities and available financial resources.

Cultural Resources

Address deferred maintenance associated with key historic assets, notably the Nature Center building and historic horse stables. Provide opportunities to interpret important cultural resources in the park, including archeological resources, historic resources, and cultural landscapes.

Natural Resources

Protect important natural resources in the Nature Center Complex with special focus on the water quality of Rock Creek through improved storm water management.

Environmental Sustainability

Rehabilitate site structures to promote a sustainable natural environment through careful design, energy conservation improvements, and the selection of environmentally friendly and durable materials for construction projects.

DEVELOPMENT OF ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTS

What has changed since you last saw the alternative concepts?

The alternative concepts found in this newsletter were developed during the internal scoping process and updated with input from federal, state, and local agencies, members of the public, and other subject matter experts. The alternative concepts will be further detailed in the plan and environmental assessment. These alternative concepts will be used to develop alternatives for the EA. We appreciate your interest and input on the concept alternatives for this special area which are now updated and outlined below.

General Changes

In response to the comments received, all alternative concepts were reviewed and edited to reduce impacts to cultural and natural resources.

- Concept 4 was removed. The high level of development illustrated in this concept was identified as not appropriate for the Nature Center, maintenance area, and Horse Center due to impacts to park resources and visitors' experiences.
- Concepts 2 and 3 are more refined from the previous newsletter and include necessary features to improve access as well as facilities that have reduced impacts to resources while still enhancing visitor experience.

Changes for the Nature Center

The interior of Nature Center remains unchanged from the previous concepts 2 and 3. However, exterior changes include the following:

- In concepts 2 and 3, the proposed restroom facility near the Nature Center was removed, while the restroom facility near picnic areas 13 and 14 would remain. The restroom would be open during daylight hours.
- In concept 3, the expanded plaza area outside the front of the Nature Center was removed to reduce impacts to the large trees located in the area. Instead, an elevated deck within the parking lot island would protect tree roots and allow for interpretive programming and group picnicking. A food truck area would be provided in the Nature Center parking lot instead of near the Horse Center as suggested by many commenters. Accessible parking would be placed just east of the food truck area.



Rock Creek Park Junior Ranger Camp

Changes for the Horse Center

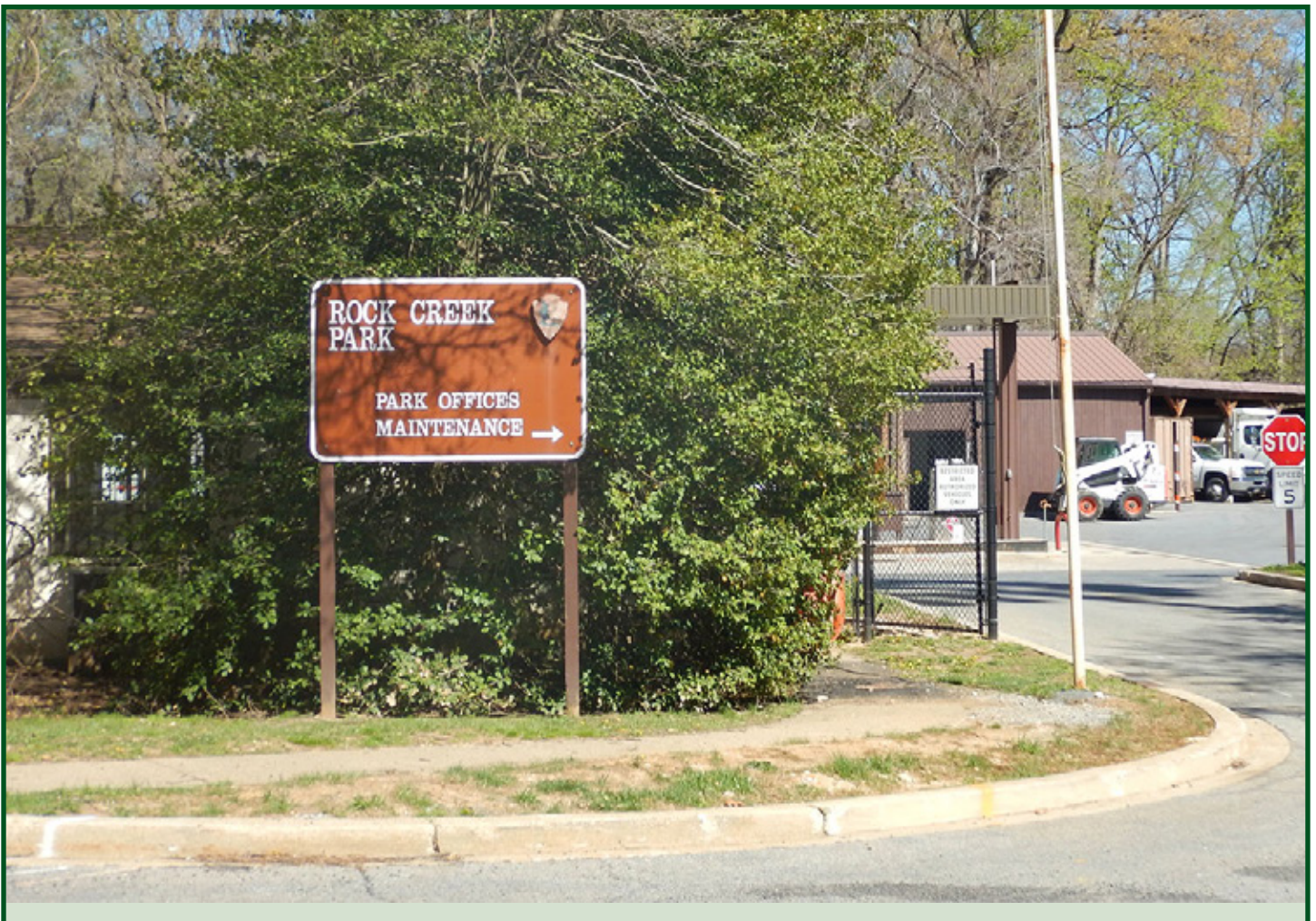
The alternative concepts for the Horse Center now focus on core needs for horse health and rider and visitor safety, with smaller changes included for enhancing the experience for members of the visiting public.

- In concepts 2 and 3, 10 50-foot-by-100-foot horse turnout areas are provided. This was identified as the primary need for horse health. Footing in all riding areas will be improved to reduce muddy and slippery conditions. Previously suggested trail connections have been removed; one from the eastern riding ring, and the other from the southern end of the barn. One paved path has been included from the barn to the maintenance area road to provide a connection for visitors and staff. The outdoor exhibit and event space has been downsized.
- In concept 2, the new indoor riding ring has been downsized.
- In concept 3, the stand-alone office and classroom building has been removed. Instead, the current office and classroom building would be expanded slightly. Concept 3 no longer includes a Horse Center service area (e.g., manure storage) off of the maintenance area drive to the south. Manure would now be stored in compost bins by the southwest edge of the stables. The new parking area and new large pasture area with demonstration gardens have been eliminated in favor of the turnout areas. The mobile food service plaza has been removed. A small food truck area has instead been included in the Nature Center parking lot, as many commenters suggested.

Changes for the Maintenance Area

Primarily in concept 3, the maintenance area was reduced in order to provide more space for habitat restoration.

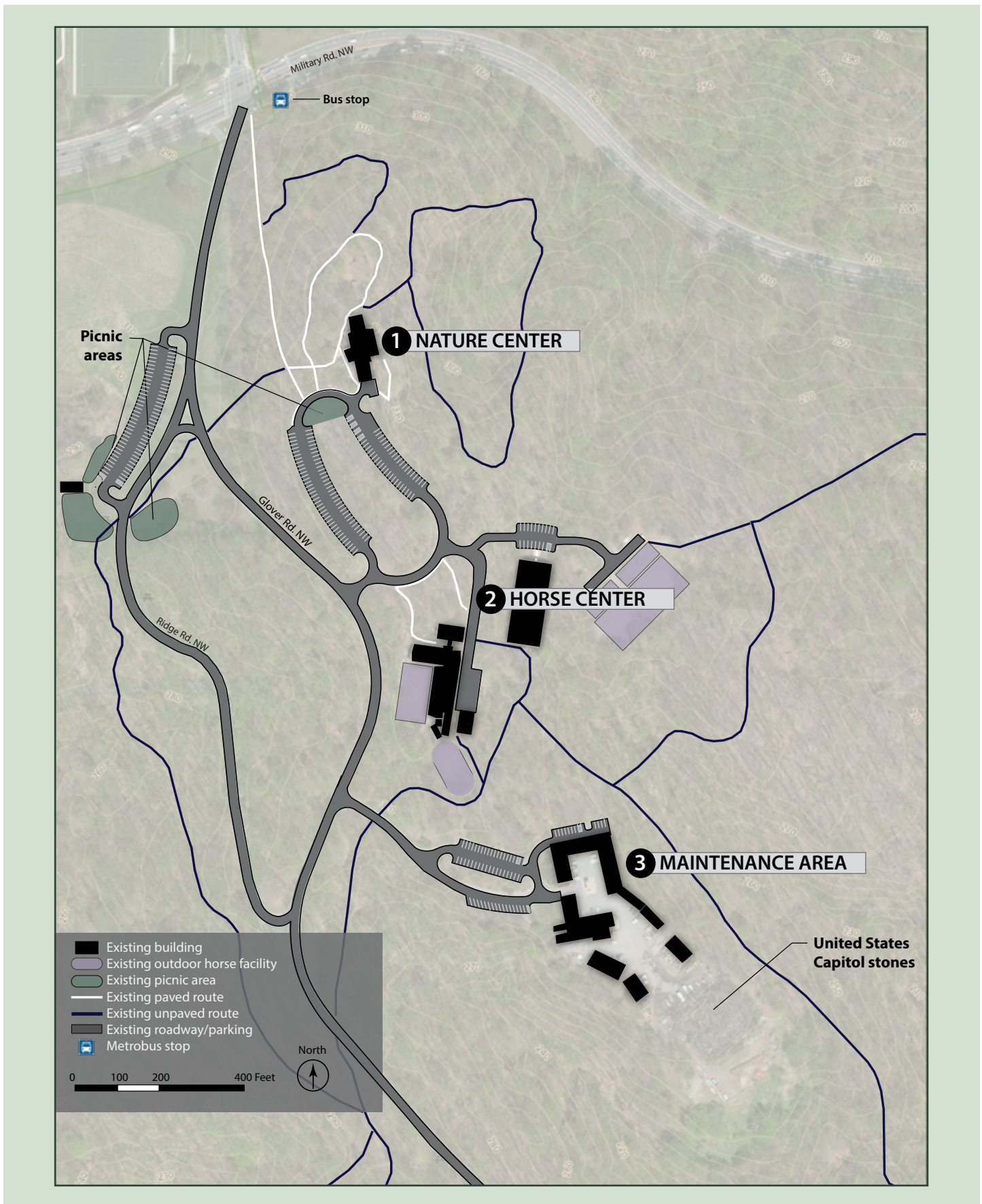
- In both concepts, the area behind the maintenance yard would be restored to its natural state for improved wildlife habitat. A trail would run along the east side of the maintenance area for birdwatching opportunities.
- In concept 3, the boardwalk path and observation platforms were removed, as these developments would encroach on the bird habitat. The shop building has been pushed to the west edge of the yard to open up the central area.



Maintenance Area

Concept 1: No Action

In this alternative concept, Rock Creek Park would continue present management practices, including continuing maintenance and repairs at the Nature Center area and implementing previously approved plans. No new construction would occur.



Common to All Action Concepts

All alternative concepts except the “No Action Concept” would complete accessibility and safety improvements and eliminate deferred maintenance. Building interiors would be reconfigured and remodeled to improve functional use and upgrade visitor and staff spaces. Office space would be reconfigured to meet adopted standards for the most efficient and optimal use of workspace. Renovations and improvements would make use of sustainable technology.

Nature Center

- Reconfigure the upper floor of the Nature Center to include a larger lobby and sales area, an outdoor deck at the back of the exhibit room, and larger accessible restrooms. The exhibit room would be reduced in size to make room for the added areas. However, the outdoor deck would provide additional space for exhibits. The small staff stairway and some corridors would be removed in the reconfiguration.
- Add an elevator with wrap-around stairway to provide universal access to the upper and lower levels. The elevator would expand the building footprint on the southeast side of the Nature Center; design elements such as using transparent glass would be incorporated to mitigate impacts to the historic structure.
- On the lower level, make the auditorium floor flat to allow for multipurpose use and universal access. A small catering kitchen and new accessible restrooms would be added. The existing patio would be a covered outdoor classroom space. Storage space would be included and flooding in the lower level would be fixed.

Horse Center

- Develop double-fenced horse pasture areas so that horses may be turned out throughout the day. For the 57 boarded horses, this concept includes 10 turnouts at 50 feet by 100 feet each. The turnouts would be partly covered for protection from sun and rain.
- Improve footing in all riding areas.
- Renovate the barn.
- Provide picnic benches with views to the horse-riding areas and interpretive waysides that welcome visitors and interpret the current and historic use of horses within the park.

Maintenance Area

- Install a trail along the east side of the maintenance area for birdwatching opportunities.
- Provide a fueling station in the south end of the yard.
- Move the U.S. Capitol stones off-site and restore the natural habitat in this area.

Other Site Improvements

- Renovate shelter structure at picnic area 14 and install new composting restrooms.
- Provide improved wayfinding, signage, and park information at site facilities and trails.
- Consider installing electric vehicle charging stations within the complex.
- Create new sidewalks or paved pathways to provide accessible connections between the bus stop on Military Road and the Nature Center, picnic areas 13 and 14, the Horse Center, and the maintenance area. Work with the District Department of Transportation to complete crosswalks and improve bus stop facilities along Military Road.
- New and renovated buildings will strive to meet LEED Certification standards and incorporate low impact development standards for exterior surfaces.



Rock Creek Park Junior Rangers

Concept 2: Fix It

This alternative concept would address the purpose and need for the plan largely through renovating indoor and outdoor facilities and making other limited proposals.

Nature Center

In addition to the actions under common to all, proposed actions include:

- Raise the planetarium floor to the upper level for accessibility and to eliminate the need for ramps and stairs. Renovate the planetarium and resolve flooding issues throughout the building.
- Existing parking and picnic areas would remain unchanged.

Horse Center

In addition to the actions under common to all, proposed actions include:

- Renovate the existing deteriorating indoor riding ring to improve riding conditions. The renovated facility would include a small viewing area.

Maintenance Area

In addition to the actions under common to all, proposed actions include:

- Renovate, reconfigure, and reprogram maintenance yard buildings and internal office and warehouse spaces to more effectively meet functional and operational needs and address accessibility.
- Add a new automotive shop and new covered waste and recycling area.
- A landscaped courtyard between the east and west wings of the maintenance building would be constructed.
- The existing footprint of the office building and parking area would be maintained.
- Retain stockpiles of trail tread mixture, topsoil, rip rap, and boulders at the back end of the maintenance yard.

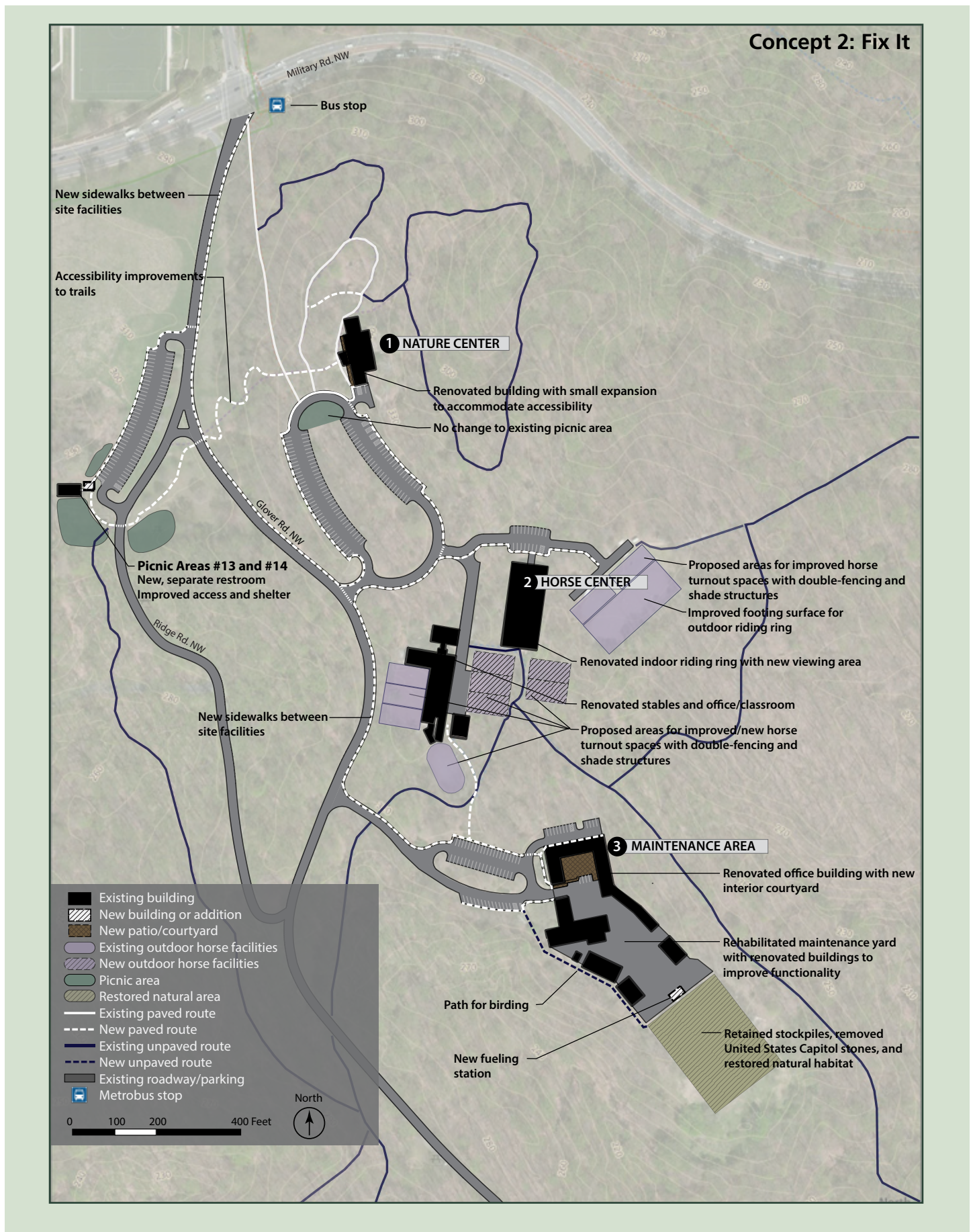
Other Site Improvements

Same as common to all.



Rock Creek Nature Center

Concept 2: Fix It





Rock Creek Nature Center



Rock Creek Horse Center

Concept 3: Nature Center Complex Reimagined

In addition to the actions under common to all, this alternative concept focuses on enhancing visitor opportunities to enjoy the Nature Center, Horse Center, and surrounding area. Areas supporting park operations, such as the maintenance area and staff offices, would be reorganized for maximum efficiency and functionality.

Nature Center

In addition to the actions in common to all, proposed actions include:

- As a main draw for visitors, expand and upgrade the Planetarium from the current 40-70 seat capacity retained in concepts 1 and 2, to an increased capacity of 90-100 seats and expand the lobby and queuing area. As with concept 2, raise the floor level to the same level as the exhibit area to eliminate the need for a second elevator and stairway.
- Also on the upper level, construct a new glass wall multi-purpose corridor area with views overlooking adjacent wooded areas at the back of the Nature Center. Construct a small outdoor interpretive deck area to replace lost space in the indoor exhibit area.
- On the lower level, add a glass-walled ramp to the auditorium, which would expand the footprint in the back of the Nature Center and allow the auditorium to remain the same size as current.
- The Nature Center building would be expanded on the south side of the building, to accommodate a new staff office area. On the north and northeast sides of the building, the building would be expanded to accommodate the larger planetarium. The multipurpose corridor and outdoor exhibit deck would expand the building on the east side. These east side expansions would remain within the current footprint of the lower level concrete patio.
- Construct an elevated deck within the parking lot island for interpretive programming and group picnicking. The area currently allows for group picnicking; the elevated deck would provide for protection of adjacent vegetation and reduce compaction.
- Provide a food truck area in the parking lot. Accessible parking would be moved to the west of the food truck area.
- Provide a bus-drop off area.

Horse Center

In addition to the actions under common to all, proposed actions include:

- Replace existing riding ring with a larger indoor/outdoor riding ring to allow for increased rider capacity and improved conditions. Large walls or windows could be opened or closed based on weather conditions.
- Provide a new office and classroom building or expand the existing building to accommodate staff needs and educational programs.
- Install compost bins for manure with access for community members.

Maintenance Area

In addition to the actions under common to all, proposed actions include:

- Replace existing building with a new two-story maintenance office building within the existing footprint to improve functionality of staff offices and add a multi-purpose room for meetings and events.
- Construct a new maintenance shop building that would consolidate many of the disjointed structures in the maintenance yard providing more efficient use of the limited space and meeting functional requirements.
- Construct a new covered outdoor storage structure that would store and protect park vehicles, heavy equipment and materials, snowplow blades, waste, and salt from the weather.
- Install a new vehicle and heavy equipment wash rack.
- If space allows, construct a new greenhouse and nursery for native plants sourced from seeds in the park to help maintain native species.
- Extend maintenance yard fence halfway into the area currently occupied by the U.S. Capitol stones. Stockpiled materials including trail tread mixture, topsoil, rip rap, and boulders, would be relocated inside the fence and the remaining area would be restored as natural habitat.

Other Site Improvements

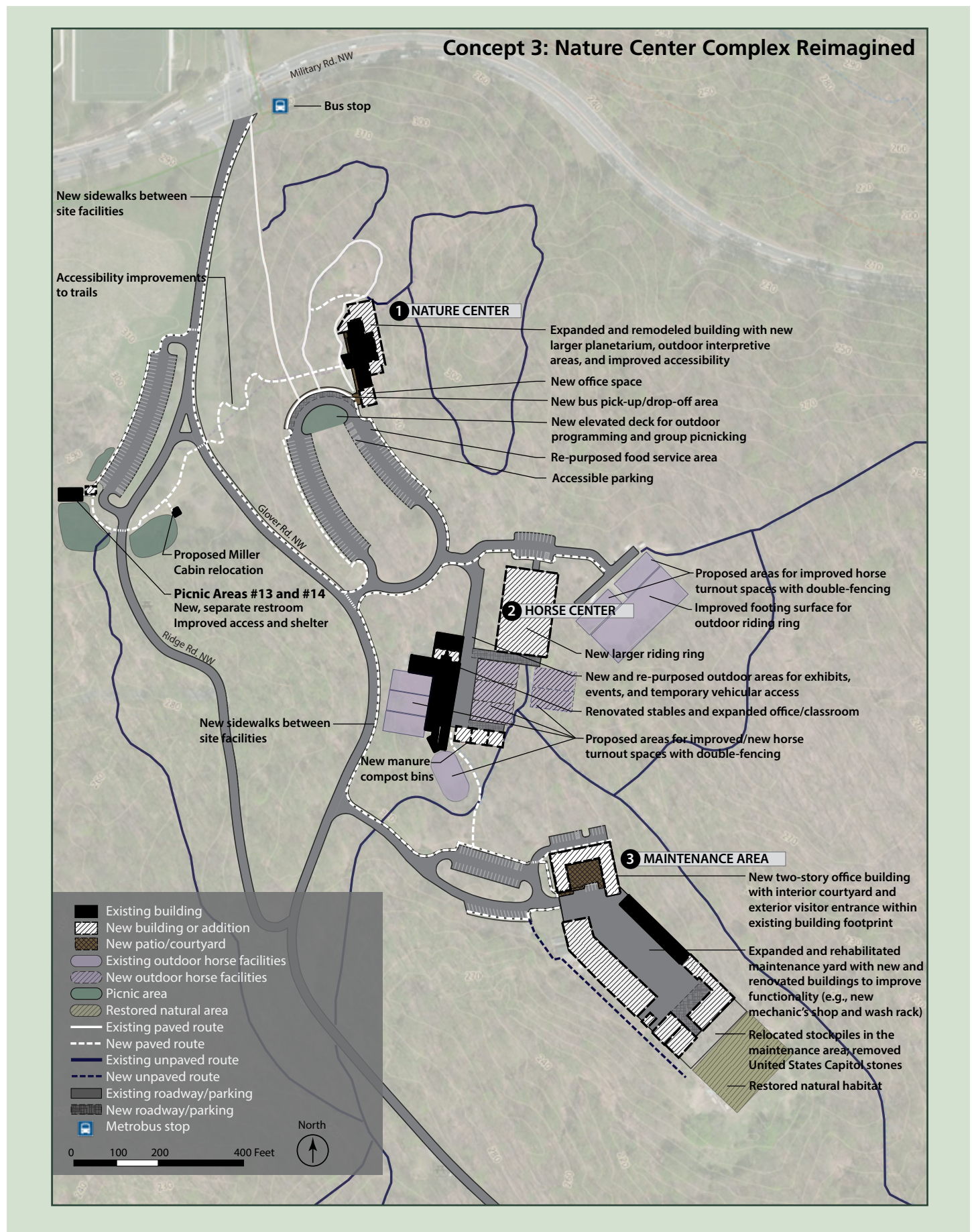
In addition to the actions under concept 2, proposed actions include:

- Relocate the Miller Cabin to the area near picnic areas 13 and 14. The Miller Cabin currently sits in a floodplain near the east bank of Rock Creek, north of Military Road. The cabin could be repurposed for exhibits and programming.



Rock Creek Horse Center

Concept 3: Nature Center Complex Reimagined



NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT (NEPA)

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires all federal agencies to consider and document the potential impacts of management actions on the human environment. The NPS applies the act in the planning process to evaluate alternative courses of action and impacts so decisions are made in accord with the conservation and preservation mandate of the NPS Organic Act of 1916. The NPS uses Director's Order 12, Conservation Planning, Environmental Impact Analysis, and Decision-making (DO-12), and accompanying DO-12 Handbook to define the steps within the NEPA process (see below) for each specific project and outline the necessary requirements and contents for environmental document preparation.

For this proposal, an environmental assessment (EA) is the NEPA document being prepared to assist in planning and decision-making and to determine if an action has the potential for significant impacts. The EA will address the project background, the purpose and need for the Development Concept Plan, the no-action alternative, and action alternatives developed through this public scoping process. The EA will also document the environmental issues and potential impacts of implementing those actions outlined in each of the action alternatives.

How to Comment:

We invite you to attend a public open house to share your ideas and questions about the plan during this 30-day public comment period. Please share your thoughts on the following question:

Do you have any ideas, concerns, or questions about the concepts presented in this newsletter?

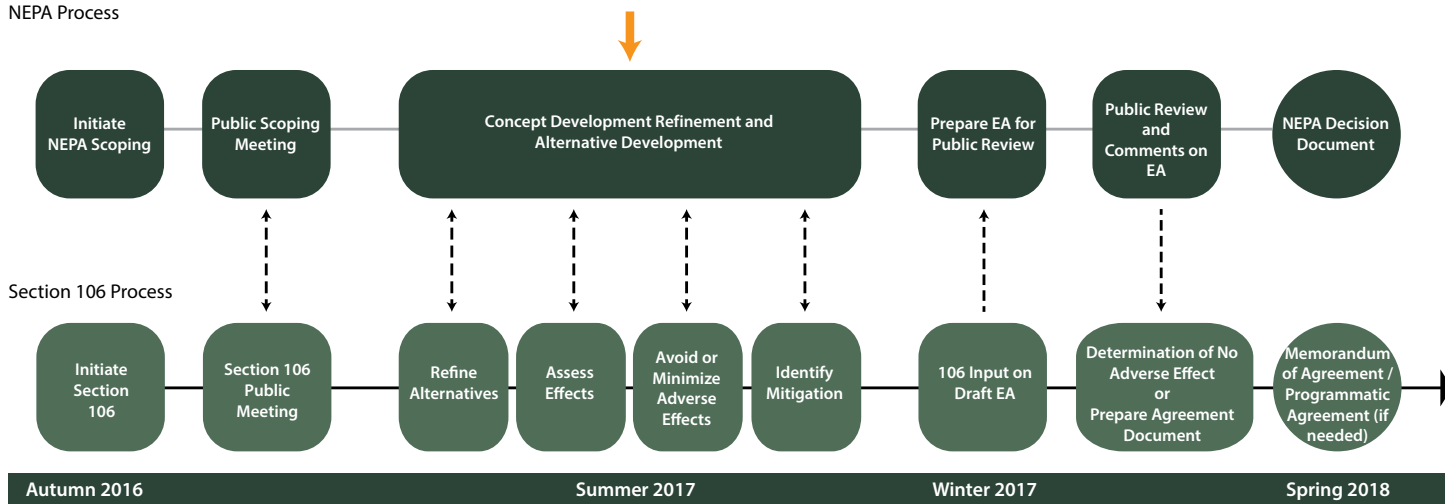
You may provide your comments

- at the meeting via a comment card,
- via the project website at parkplanning.nps.gov/ROCRDCP, or
- by writing to: Superintendent, Rock Creek Park; Attention: ROCR DCP; 3545 Williamsburg Lane, NW; Washington, DC 20008

Please provide comments by December 15th, 2017. Only written comments will be accepted.

Please Note: Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment—including your personal identifying information—may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

NEPA Process



Thank you for your continued interest in Rock Creek Park!