

Comments on the Section 106 Historic Preservation Consultation for the Kennedy Center Expansion Connection Project: Identifying Cultural Resources

February 8, 2016

The National Mall Coalition was unable until now to complete comments regarding the Section 106 Historic Preservation Act consultation meeting on December 10, 2015 for the Kennedy Center Expansion Connection Project. We hope these comments will become part of the record and deliberations in the ongoing Section 106 Historic Preservation review for this project.

The section of the PowerPoint presentation that outlines the “character-defining features” of the Kennedy Center gets to the major concern we have had all along, and have commented on during meetings and in writing since 2011: none of the proposed Alternatives takes its cue from those features – bilateral symmetry, low horizontality, clear, geometric form, and so on – or succeeds in enhancing the Center as an iconic public building and a memorial to President Kennedy. We believe that if these character-defining features had been laid out at the beginning of the Section 106 consultation process, a more harmonious set of design concepts would be under consideration. It is not too late to look at additional alternatives that achieve intelligent and thoughtful preservation goals and we urge NCPC and NPS to do so.

In reviewing the Alternatives and the different ways they propose to improve access, we also have found ourselves confused about the scope and goals of the project. We would appreciate answers to the following questions:

1. What exactly is the primary purpose of the project? To provide pedestrian access across Rock Creek Parkway to the Kennedy Center itself or to the future rehearsal pavilions south of the Center? Where should the access be located? The distance between the River Terrace and the future pavilions is great enough, and the separate architectural context of those buildings is different enough, as to rule out one or more of the proposed Alternatives. Only the River Terrace Alternative would provide direct access to the Terrace and to the Potomac River (and a future ferry stop).
2. Related to that, who is the intended user? Formally clad concert-going visitors to the Center itself? Musicians attending informal rehearsals at the pavilions? Recreational bicyclists simply passing through? Is it even possible, or desirable, to satisfy all these needs with one design solution? Or should we be looking at two separate concepts that separate out park users from Kennedy Center visitors?
3. What takes priority, providing pedestrian and bicycle safety, health, and comfort or ensuring automobile traffic flow on Rock Creek Parkway? Why is the pedestrian being required to climb stairs and ramps to cross a bridge over only four lanes of traffic when a traffic light is the simplest, safest, and least costly solution? (NPS in January 2016 installed a new traffic signal on Clara Barton Parkway to provide pedestrian and bicycle access across this NPS Parkway to the C&O Canal.)
4. Has consideration been given to another alternative: a pedestrian/bicycle tunnel under the roadway as is done elsewhere in DC? Could the “underground bike path” in the At-Grade Alternative be extended to run beneath the Parkway?

The following are comments on each of the four Alternatives:

- **At-Grade Access Alternative:** If the goal is simply safe passage across the Parkway to the future pavilions, the simplest, safest for pedestrians, and least physically and visually obtrusive solution is to create a new at-grade crossing with a traffic light. There is an existing at grade crossing with a spotlight that leads patrons directly to the garage/pedestrian entrance and the main steps to the Center.

If another one is needed near the pavilions, the stoplight could be synchronized with the existing light. The At-Grade option would have the fewest adverse effects for pedestrians as well as for the Kennedy Center and Rock Creek Parkway.

- **Bridge Access with Ramp and Stairs Alternative:** This concept prioritizes traffic flow over pedestrian safety and comfort that should be the true goal. It would force people on foot or on bicycles to climb stairs and/or take elevators, ramps, cross a bridge, then descend ramps and stairs in a convoluted trek over the four lanes of Parkway traffic. It would create a major physical and visual intrusion into the environment. The open bridge connection would be unpleasant to use in bad weather. Rain, wind, ice, and snow would make crossing this bridge potentially dangerous – and unusable.
- **Bridge Access with Ramp and Elevator Alternative:** This has the same problems as the other Bridge Alternative.
- **River Terrace Access Alternative:** If the primary goal is to provide access to the Kennedy Center structure itself, and to connect the Center with the River, then this is only alternative that directly does this. But the skinny stairs and elevator towers look like an architectural afterthought – a tack on to the whole mass that is close to 1000 feet in length along the riverfront -- and fail to appropriately respect the historic character and monumentality of the Center. Sending recreational bicyclists and pedestrians on Rock Creek up to the River Terrace in order to cross four lanes of the Parkway makes no sense. If direct access to the Center is the goal – along with access to the river -- other alternative designs need to be considered, as mentioned below.

The Kennedy Center is a memorial to John F. Kennedy and these alternatives do nothing to recognize that important fact. The NCPC and NPS should look into alternatives that do. As proposed in the 1980s by Arthur Cotton Moore FAIA, one such alternative would be a grand set of steps over the Parkway connecting the Center to the waterside walks and the Georgetown waterfront buttressed by flanking elevators. Located at the center of the classically composed Center, this would be similar to the steps that give access to the Lincoln and Jefferson memorials. Such a grand staircase could visually ground the Center, provide a pedestrian entrance that would deliver people directly to the Grand Foyer, and be connected to a fixed cantilevered dock similar to the one at Washington Harbour. This would allow patrons to arrive by water rather than drive and fight traffic on the congested bridges and roadways. It would provide a continuous connection for Foggy Bottom over the traffic-choked Parkway to the riverfront. The steps could be designed as a cantilever thereby placing no weight on the existing cantilevered terrace. The elevators could have an intermediate stop at the cantilevered floor under the existing main terrace, allowing patrons to access the center protected from inclement weather. A residual benefit would be that these steps would function as a grandstand for watching the now frequent boat races on the river. The grand staircase would be a fitting memorial-like addition to the Center reinforcing its role as a memorial to President Kennedy.

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