



## Executive Director's Recommendation

Commission Meeting: July 9, 2015

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<b>PROJECT</b> <b>Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center</b> Lincoln Memorial Washington, DC	<b>NCPC FILE NUMBER</b> 6597  <b>NCPC MAP FILE NUMBER</b> 1.43(38.00)44167
<b>SUBMITTED BY</b> United States Department of the Interior National Park Service	<b>APPLICANT'S REQUEST</b> Final approval of site and building plans
<b>REVIEW AUTHORITY</b> Approval per 40 U.S.C. 8903, 40 U.S.C. § 8905, and 40 U.S.C. 8722(b)(1) and (d)	<b>PROPOSED ACTION</b> Approve as requested  <b>ACTION ITEM TYPE</b> Staff Presentation

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### PROJECT SUMMARY

The National Park Service, on behalf of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, has submitted final site and building plans for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center (Visitor Center). Public Law 108-126 (2003) authorizes the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund to construct the Visitor Center at or near the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on Federal land "in order to better inform and educate the public about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Vietnam War." It also required that the Visitor Center be located underground. In August 2006, the Commission approved a site for the Visitor Center on the northern grounds of the Lincoln Memorial. The site is located west of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial across Henry Bacon Drive, and is bounded by Constitution Avenue, Henry Bacon Drive, Lincoln Memorial Circle, and 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, NW. The site is currently used for active and passive recreation and contains one softball field and a National Park Service concession facility. With the Commission's approval of the site in 2006, NCPC and the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts adopted design guidelines to guide the development of the project.

### KEY INFORMATION

- The Commission approved a site for the Visitor Center on the Lincoln Memorial Grounds in 2006 and adopted design guidelines for the project.
- The Commission approved the preliminary site and building plans on July 12, 2012. Since the Commission's preliminary approval, the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts (CFA) provided comments and suggested design modifications for the project. CFA approved the final plans on May 21, 2015. The primary modifications since the Commission reviewed the preliminary plans include the following: elimination of the retaining wall adjacent to the entry stairs and replacement with a grass berm; relocation of the building on the site to the north to accommodate the grass berm; reshaping of the grass berm defined by the entry ramp to be more organic; and an increase in length of the horizontal rail located on the edge of the green roof.

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## RECOMMENDATION

The Commission:

**Approves** the final site and building plans for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center on the Lincoln Memorial Grounds.

**Confirms** that the final design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center is consistent with the design guidelines adopted during site selection.

**Notes** the National Park Service will review the final finishes and color selection of the horizontal rail in consultation with review agency staff, as appropriate, to ensure compatibility with the surrounding context and minimize its appearance.

## PROJECT REVIEW TIMELINE

<b>Previous actions</b>	<b>August 2006</b> – Commission approved site for Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center
	<b>December 2007</b> – Commission provided comments on concept design
	<b>June 2009</b> – Commission provided comments on revised concept design
	<b>July 2012</b> – Commission approved preliminary plans
<b>Remaining actions</b> (anticipated)	None

Prepared by J. Hirsch  
July 1, 2015

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## I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### Site

The 5.2 acre site for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center is located on the grounds of the Lincoln Memorial at the west end of the National Mall. It is situated north of the Lincoln Memorial across Lincoln Memorial Circle and west of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial across Henry Bacon Drive, and is bounded by Constitution Avenue, Henry Bacon Drive, Lincoln Memorial Circle, and 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, NW. The site is an

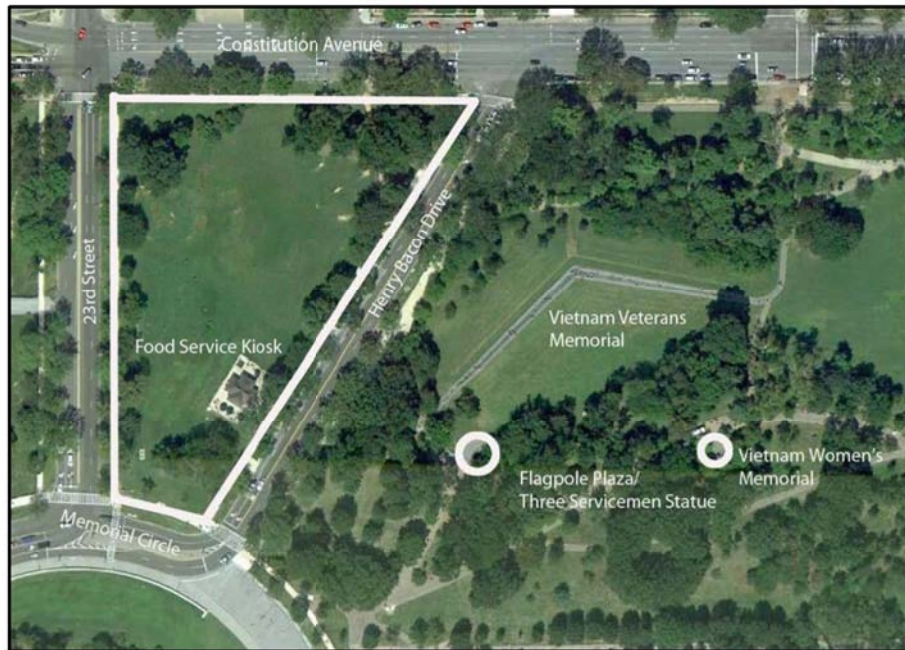


Figure 1: Project Location

open grass panel surrounded on its perimeter by mature elm trees that are part of the site's historic landscape. The site currently has one softball field, an NPS concession kiosk, and grass areas for active and passive recreation. The site is relatively flat, but is approximately three feet lower in its center than at its edges along the surrounding streets. The applicant proposes to use the central portion of the site to construct the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center (Visitor Center) of approximately 37,000 gross square feet.

### Background

Title I of Public Law 108-126 authorizes the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund to construct a Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center "at or near the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on federal land in the District of Columbia, or its environs." The legislation requires that the Visitor Center be limited in size to the minimum necessary to educate the public about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Vietnam War, and requires that the Visitor Center be constructed underground. The authorizing legislation also requires NPS to "develop a written interpretive plan for the visitor center in accordance with National Park Service policy."

Title II of Public Law 108-126 amends the Commemorative Works Act (CWA) to establish a Reserve area within the great cross-axis of the Mall where the siting of new commemorative works is prohibited. However, Title I states that this restriction does not apply to the Visitor Center and that the Visitor Center may locate within the Reserve. Title I also states that NCPC and the U.S.

Commission of Fine Arts (CFA) have approval of the Center and that final approval of the Visitor Center shall not be withheld. Title II amends U.S.C. 40 § 8905(b) of the Commemorative Works Act to state that NCPD and CFA may develop site specific criteria or guidelines for commemorative works that are mutually agreed upon. NCPD and CFA adopted joint design guidelines for the design of the Visitor Center, and these guidelines were subsequently incorporated as mitigation in NCPD's Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) issued at the time of site selection in 2006. The Commission approved the site for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center on August 3, 2006.

The Commission has reviewed the project a number of times since site approval. In 2007, the Commission provided comments on a concept design. At that time, the Commission indicated that while the design met some of the design guidelines, it did not meet others and the scale and visibility of the Visitor Center needed to be reduced. In 2009, the Commission commented on a revised concept design and found that while improvements had been made since the 2007 concept design review, additional modifications were required to satisfy the design guidelines. Primarily the comments centered around the visibility of the building and its impact on the surrounding landscape.

NPS returned to the Commission in July 2012 with preliminary site and building plans. The applicant had responded to the Commission's comments on the concept designs. The impacts of the Visitor Center on the landscape had been minimized and the visibility of the building reduced. The Commission approved the preliminary site and building plans and found that the design of the Visitor Center was consistent with the design guidelines included as mitigation at the time of site selection in 2006. With its preliminary approval, the Commission noted that as a condition of the Memorandum

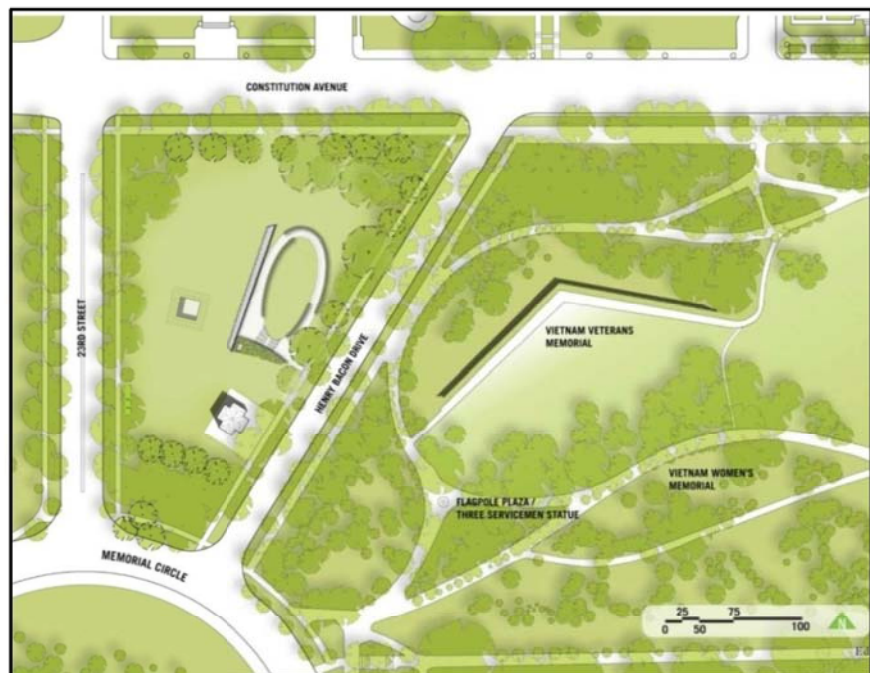


Figure 2: Approved preliminary site plan for the Visitor Center – July 2012

of Agreement signed under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, additional consultation would occur regarding the courtyard opening, the skylight over the entrance, the development of the landscape treatment of the site, and night lighting.



## **Proposal**

The design intent of the Visitor Center remains consistent with the plans the Commission approved in July 2012 - to minimize the visibility of the center while welcoming visitors and supporting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial experience. The experience of visiting the Visitor Center is intended to be secondary to visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The two-level structure will house exhibit space, a bookstore, restrooms, and lobby areas. The architecture and exhibits are designed to be as integrated as possible so that visitors are enveloped within a cohesive environment.

The final site and building plans of the Visitor Center retain the primary form and features that the Commission reviewed and approved in July 2012. In order to build the underground facility, the grade of the site will be raised with berms by approximately 3'6" so that the center of the site will be approximately 22'6" above mean sea level (AMSL). A central feature of the Visitor Center is a courtyard that will be partially covered by a green roof. A geothermal well system will provide the building's heating and cooling needs. The courtyard and use of geothermal technology minimizes the need for air intake grilles along the surface and eliminates the need for a cooling tower which will lower the noise generated by the building.

Visitors will use a curved path located directly off the sidewalk along Henry Bacon Drive to gain access to the entrance of the structure. Along with the curved path, stairs next to a grass berm (3:1 slope) will lead visitors to the below-grade entry. The curved path surrounds an organic grass berm which includes built in stone seat walls with recessed lighting to accommodate visitors. A horizontal rail along the edge of the green roof will prevent people from approaching the edge and eliminates the need for a vertical railing. The horizontal rail will be approximately 8 feet wide, 248 feet long, and be light gray in color. Within the concrete structure of the horizontal rail, there will be an area of unwalkable infill consisting of a metal frame (steel frame with black oxide finish) and tension wires (stainless steel) at four inches on center. This design is intended to keep people away from the edge as well as protect anyone from falling should they go beyond the planted area of the roof.

The design continues to incorporate a "ha-ha wall" condition to shield the opening in the lawn created by the courtyard. A "ha-ha wall" is a landscape design element used to keep someone from crossing a boundary without interrupting views. The "ha-ha" condition consists of a low concrete wall to separate the open lawn from the courtyard opening. An oxidized stainless steel guardrail will be installed on top of a low concrete wall.

The landscape design for the Visitor Center maintains most of the trees surrounding the perimeter of the site and incorporates recommendations from the Lincoln Memorial Cultural Landscape Report. Landscape rehabilitation will reestablish, on two sides of Lincoln Circle (north and south), the intent of the original implemented historic planting plan for the Lincoln Memorial and Grounds. Non-historic trees and shrubs will be removed and replaced according to the historic planting plans in the CLR.

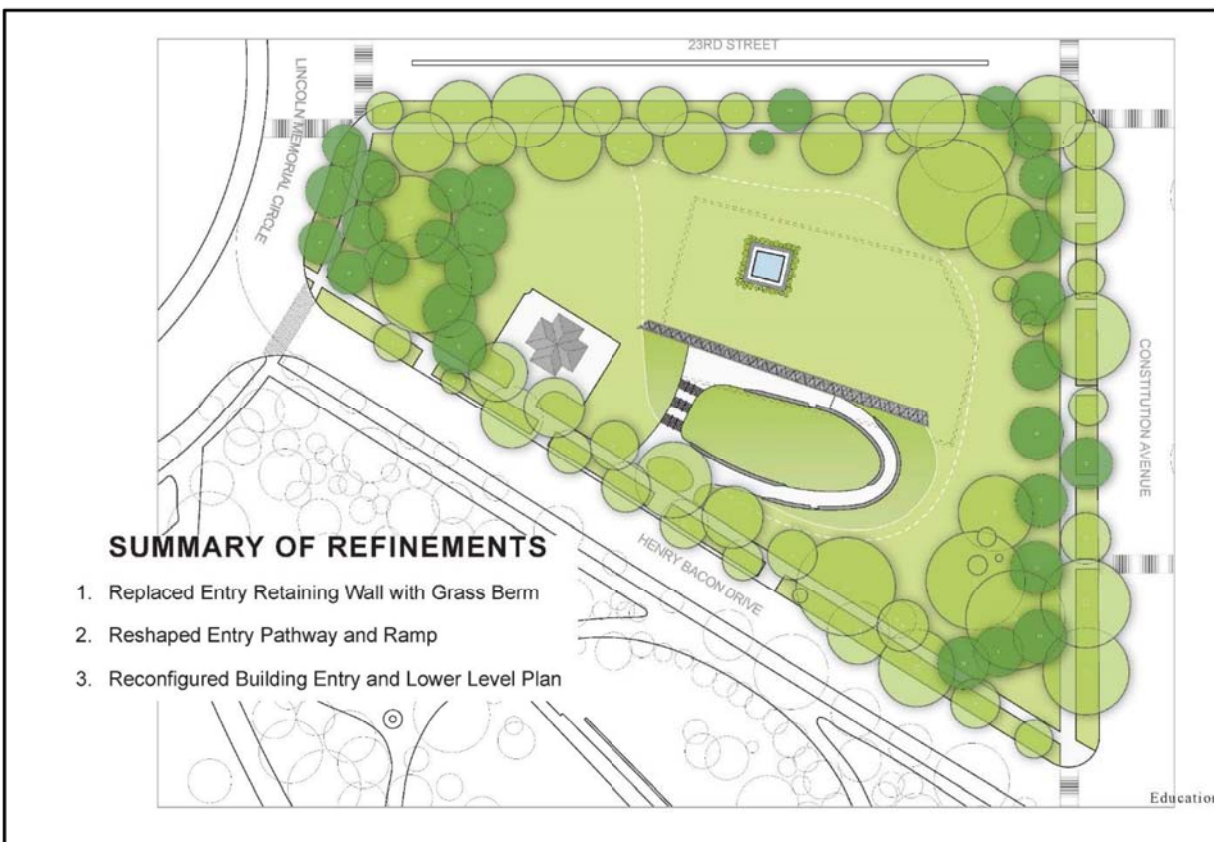


Figure 3: Final site plan for the Visitor Center

Modifications to the Visitor Center since the Commission's preliminary approval are in response to comments, concerns, and suggestions from the Commission as well as the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts (CFA) and other interested stakeholders. To satisfy life safety and egress concerns of NPS code officials, a second means of egress was added to the entry path. The final site plan incorporates two means of entry and exit from the Henry Bacon Drive sidewalk.

Comments concerning the similarity of the form of the Visitor Center (two perpendicular walls) to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, necessitated other changes to the design. The retaining wall adjacent to the entry stair has been removed, and a gradual grass berm at a 3:1 slope has been incorporated into the landscaping. In order to realize the minimum slope of the lawn down to the lower plaza and have room to enter the building, the building shifted 22 feet to the north. The exterior stair remained in the same position. In order to protect the sloped lawn, the horizontal rail increased in size by approximately 22 feet to the north and 23 feet to the south and its total length is now 248 feet. The entry doors to the building were also relocated so that the doors are on axis with the entry stair. In the preliminary plans approved by the Commission, the entry doors were not on axis with the stair, but were adjacent in a covered "forecourt". Due to removal of the retaining wall and the changes to the entry, there were also modifications to the entry and lower level floor plans. However, the overall size of the building remains the same at 37,000 square feet.



In response to comments from the CFA in 2014, the grass berm defined by the surrounding entry ramp has been reshaped. In the final plans, this berm takes on an organic shape rather than an ellipse. CFA's comments indicated that the form of an ellipse was inwardly focused and did not respond to the open curves of other areas along the National Mall such as Constitution Gardens and the linear geometry of the Lincoln Memorial.



Figure 4: Site plan indicates building shifted to the north



Figure 5: Partial site plan



*Figure 6: View towards Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center from Henry Bacon Drive*



*Figure 7: View at bottom of entry ramp*



## Project Analysis/Conformance

### Executive Summary

The modifications made since the Commission granted preliminary approval for the Visitor Center in July 2012 continue to improve upon the project. The primary modification to the design eliminated the retaining wall adjacent to the entry stair and as a result the horizontal rail increased in size. In place of the retaining wall, there will be a grass berm at a 3:1 slope which softens the presence of the building in the landscape. By eliminating the retaining wall, the building will not resemble the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as the Visitor Center will be a secondary experience to the memorial itself.

Overall, the project is consistent with the design guidelines adopted at the time of site selection and required as mitigation under the National Environmental Policy Act. The Visitor Center has been designed with respect for its surrounding context of the National Mall. The impact on the landscape and surrounding viewsheds has been minimized through design. The horizontal rail system has eliminated the need for vertical guardrails and minimized the visibility of the Visitor Center from the surrounding streets. In addition, by minimizing the number of skylights and grade changes, multi-purpose recreational uses can continue on the site. Finally, the applicant has committed to a lighting plan that will respect the existing hierarchy established by the lighting at the Lincoln Memorial and only lighting that is necessary for life safety, security, and maintenance will be provided. Therefore staff recommends the Commission **approve the final site and building plans for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center on the Lincoln Memorial Grounds**. As discussed in detail below within the analysis section, the final design is consistent with the design guidelines and staff recommends that the Commission **confirm that the final design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center is consistent with the design guidelines**.

Given the length and size of the horizontal rail and its increase in size from the Commission's preliminary approval, the color and finish of this element is important to minimizing its visibility. Therefore, staff has requested that the National Park Service continue to work with the design team and appropriate review agencies regarding the finish and color to reduce the visibility of this element. The National Park Service will consult further on the final finish and color of the horizontal rail, and staff is recommending that the Commission **note the National Park Service will review the final finishes and color selection of the horizontal rail in consultation with review agency staff, as appropriate, to ensure compatibility with the surrounding context and minimize its appearance**.

### Analysis

The following section analyzes the design of the Visitor Center against the 14 design guidelines and one additional requirement, all of which are required mitigation by the Commission action for site selection on August 3, 2006. In July 2012, at the time of preliminary review, the Commission found that the project was in conformance with the guidelines. The analysis below confirms that the final site and building plans for the Visitor Center are consistent with the design guidelines.

Design Guideline #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 from within the axial view sheds of 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, NW and Henry Bacon Drive, NW.*

The Visitor Center has been designed as an underground facility. Portions of the courtyard and horizontal rail are visible from the Lincoln Memorial steps and podium. Though these elements will be visible, trees to be planted as part of the landscape plan for the project will help mitigate the impact on the view. By incorporating a curved entry ramp that surrounds a green berm, the visibility of the sunken entrance from the surrounding streets has been minimized and reduced the impact that the Visitor Center will have on the landscape. In addition, by raising the grade of the site and with the design of a green roof to cover a portion of the courtyard, the Visitor Center will be minimally visible from the intersection of Constitution Avenue and 23<sup>rd</sup> Street. While a portion of the Visitor Center (horizontal rail) will be visible from Henry Bacon Drive, the building does not dominate the view shed.

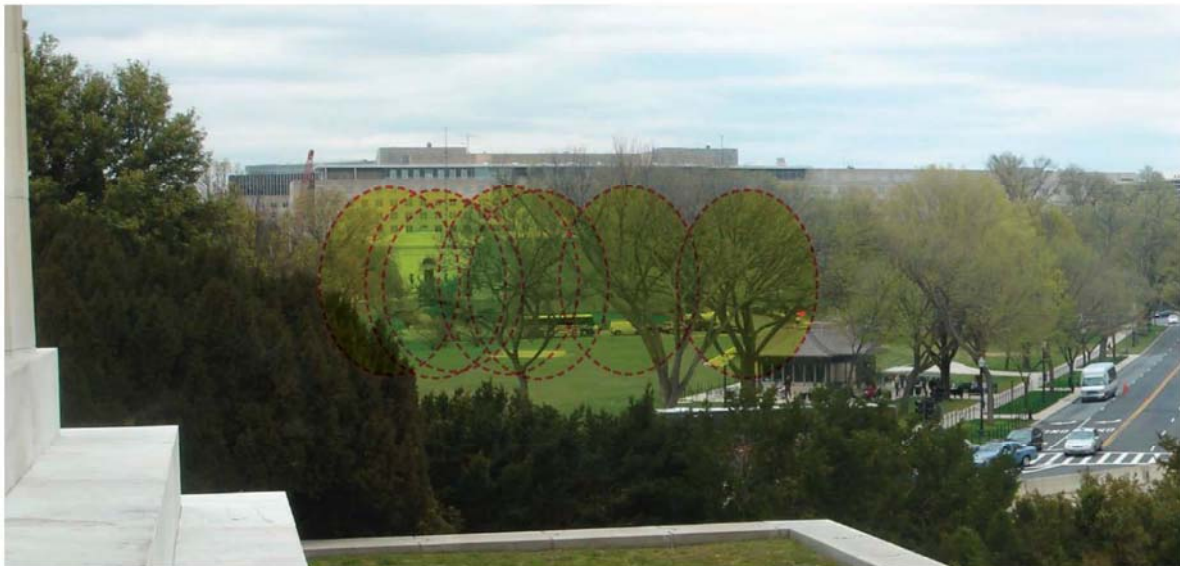


Figure 8: View of the Visitor Center from the Lincoln Memorial





Figure 9: View of the Visitor Center from Henry Bacon Drive, NW

Design Guideline #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.*

The Visitor Center will be minimally visible from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. When standing on the path of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and looking west, portions of the horizontal rail may be visible. However, the experience of visiting the memorial will not be disrupted.



Figure 10: View of the Visitor Center from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

Design Guideline #3

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

As was proposed in the preliminary plans, the design of the Visitor Center will raise the grade of the site by 3'6" in order to accommodate the curved entry ramp. The entryway to the Visitor Center will be at an elevation of 7' and the slope of the curved ramp is gradual in order to descend from the top of the ramp at an elevation of 20' AMSL. While the grade is proposed to be raised, it is to allow an accessible entry ramp and the character of the landscape will be maintained.

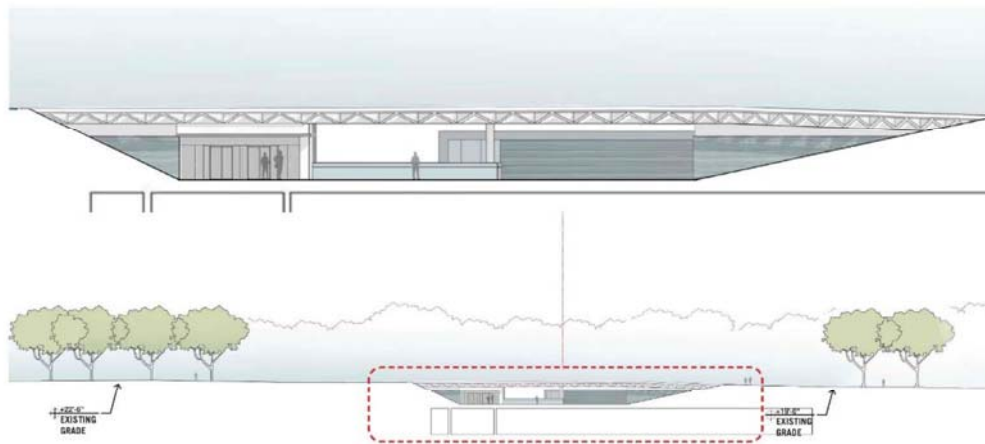


Figure 11: Proposed grade change

Design Guideline #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.*

The interior of the Visitor Center will have limited illumination to what is required for life safety, security, and maintenance. Any lighting that is visible from the Lincoln Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, or Constitution Avenue will be indirect or ambient lighting. Light emanating from the Visitor Center's interior will not interfere or encroach on the surrounding memorials and streets due to both the low level of illumination that will be provided and the indirect nature of the lighting.

Design Guideline #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.*



The courtyard opening, the curved entry ramp, and the horizontal rail are the most visible elements of the Visitor Center from the surrounding sidewalks. The berm at the center of the approach ramp will provide screening of the building entry and will minimize the visual impact of the building on the landscape. Though the courtyard opening may be visible from portions of the surrounding sidewalk, it has been designed to be as minimally intrusive as possible. Though the length of the horizontal rail has increased since July 2012 and is therefore more visible than it was in the preliminary design, the elimination of the retaining wall adjacent to the entry stairs and use of a grass berm in its place is an improvement in how the building fits into the larger landscape. In addition, with the elimination of the retaining wall the Visitor Center is not visually similar to the actual Vietnam Veterans Memorial.



Figure 12: View from 22<sup>nd</sup> and Constitution Avenue, NW

#### Design Guideline #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.*

Since the Commission preliminary approval, additional bollard lights have been added to illuminate the second egress path required to meet life safety codes. Bollard lights were also added to illuminate the path from the stair to the Henry Bacon Drive sidewalk. In general, lighting for the Visitor Center has been restricted to the minimum necessary for building code and lighting safety standards. By limiting the illumination levels to the minimum necessary, the Visitor Center will not interfere with or encroach upon views to and from the surrounding memorials on the National Mall. Lighting will be provided under the seat walls to illuminate the curved entry path at night and down lights will be installed under the horizontal rail at the waffle slab to illuminate the area adjacent to the entry. An average illumination level of one footcandle is required at the exit passageway. The lighting fixtures will light the path, but the light source will be obscured by the built in seat wall and the lamps will be shielded from illuminating the night sky. The lighting plan has been designed in deference to the surrounding context including adjacent memorials.

Design Guideline #7

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

The amount of paving for the Visitor Center has increased slightly from July 2012 due to the addition of an additional egress path. The paving included in the design is the minimum necessary for the expected number of visitors. No additional paving area for gathering space or queuing is proposed and the design incorporates seat walls along the curved entry path for visitors to use while waiting to enter the center. Paving will constitute approximately 10,145 square feet, divided between the entry plaza (approximately 2,700 square feet); the curved path (5,900 square feet), the stair (650 square feet), and the upper path area (895).

Design Guideline #8

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

The final plan remains consistent with the preliminary plans and no new parking areas are proposed for the Visitor Center.

Design Guideline #9

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

The Visitor Center has one entrance for visitors and service from the Henry Bacon Drive sidewalk.

Design Guideline #10

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

There has been no change to the proposed pedestrian street crossings since the Commission reviewed the preliminary plans. No new crosswalks will be added with the construction of the Visitor Center. Existing crosswalks are located at signaled intersections including at the traffic light on Henry Bacon Drive and Lincoln Circle. Most pedestrians will use this crosswalk to access the Visitor Center. Two other pedestrian crossing points are located across Constitution Avenue at the intersections of 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> Streets. NPS has indicated that after the Visitor Center is open, they will evaluate whether a midblock crossing from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on Henry Bacon Drive is needed.

Design Guideline #11

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



The Visitor Center will be constructed outside of the critical root zone of the existing elm trees. The applicant has developed a tree protection plan to preserve the existing trees on the site both during and after construction.

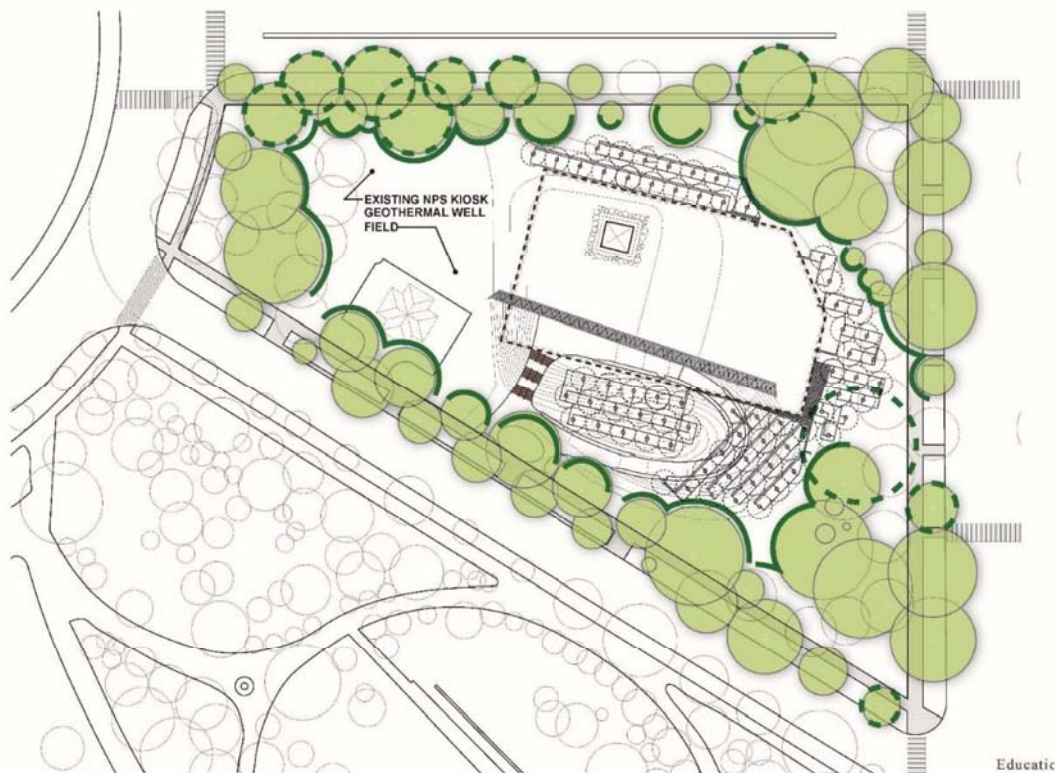


Figure 13: Tree protection plan

Design Guideline #12

*The project will place new landscaping on the site in accordance with the National Park Service's Cultural Landscape Report (CLR) for the Lincoln Memorial referenced in the Environmental Assessment. NPS will maintain the open grass panel on the site surrounded at the site's perimeter by elm trees.*

The final landscape design is consistent with the preliminary plans and takes into account recommendations in the Lincoln Memorial CLR. Non-historic trees will be removed and replaced with American elms as appropriate on the edge of the site in order to reestablish the original planting plan for the Lincoln Memorial Grounds. Landscape rehabilitation will reestablish, on two sides of Lincoln Circle (north and south), the intent of the original implemented historic planting plan for the Lincoln Memorial and Grounds. In addition, the landscape design will minimize the addition of non-historic plant material (including trees, shrubs, and ground cover) and by incorporating a green roof in the design of the Visitor Center much of the existing site will remain open.

Design Guideline #13

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

Since the Commission preliminary approval, the amount of space for multi-purpose recreation has decreased due to the location of the building on the site and increase in the size of the horizontal retail. At the time of preliminary review, an estimated 26% of the site was available for multi-purpose recreation. The applicant estimates that with the final designs approximately 24-25% of the site will be available for recreation.

Design Guideline #14

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

The design of the Visitor Center incorporates a horizontal rail along the edge of the green roof to protect against potential falls. The horizontal rail eliminates the need for vertical guardrails. The ha-ha condition around the courtyard opening features a concrete guard wall capped with an oxidized stainless steel guardrail. These elements were both included in the preliminary plans, and though they will be visible, the number of vertical elements has been kept to a minimum.

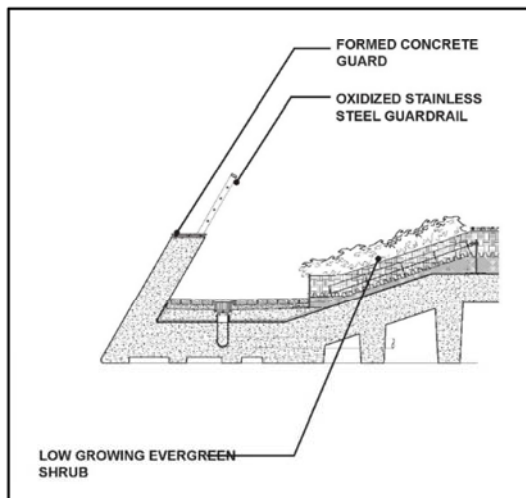


Figure 14: Detail of ha-ha condition at courtyard opening

The horizontal rail has increased in size by approximately 45 feet since the Commission approved the preliminary plans and will be approximately 248 feet in length. The increase in length is needed to protect the 3:1 slope that has replaced the retaining wall adjacent to the entry stairs (on the south). The horizontal rail increased by 23 feet to the south and approximately 22 feet to the north to protect the slope. In exchange for a larger horizontal rail, the Visitor Center has only one façade and its form is distinct from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. This modification was specifically made in response to CFA comments concerning the similarity of the Visitor Center (preliminary



plans) to the memorial itself. Though the horizontal rail has increased in size, by removing the retaining wall adjacent to the stairs, the Visitor Center no longer resembles the memorial itself.

Staff notes that the color and finish of the horizontal rail is critical to minimizing its visibility particularly given its increase in size. Staff has requested that the National Park Service continue to work with the design team and appropriate review agencies regarding the finish and color of this element. The National Park Service has agreed to consult further on the final finish and color of the horizontal rail and staff is recommending that the Commission **notes the National Park Service will review the final finishes and color selection of the horizontal rail in consultation with review agency staff, as appropriate, to ensure compatibility with the surrounding context and minimize its appearance.**

The proposed perimeter security elements remain consistent with the preliminary plans the Commission approved. Minimal perimeter security elements are proposed. Based on a threat assessment completed by the U.S. Park Police, bollards are proposed for the top of the curved path adjacent to the sidewalk on Henry Bacon Drive. These bollards are needed to keep an errant vehicle from crashing into the Visitor Center. Since the Commission's preliminary approval, the U.S. Park Police requested that an additional tree will be planted to the south of the food kiosk for security reasons and this tree is included in the final plans.

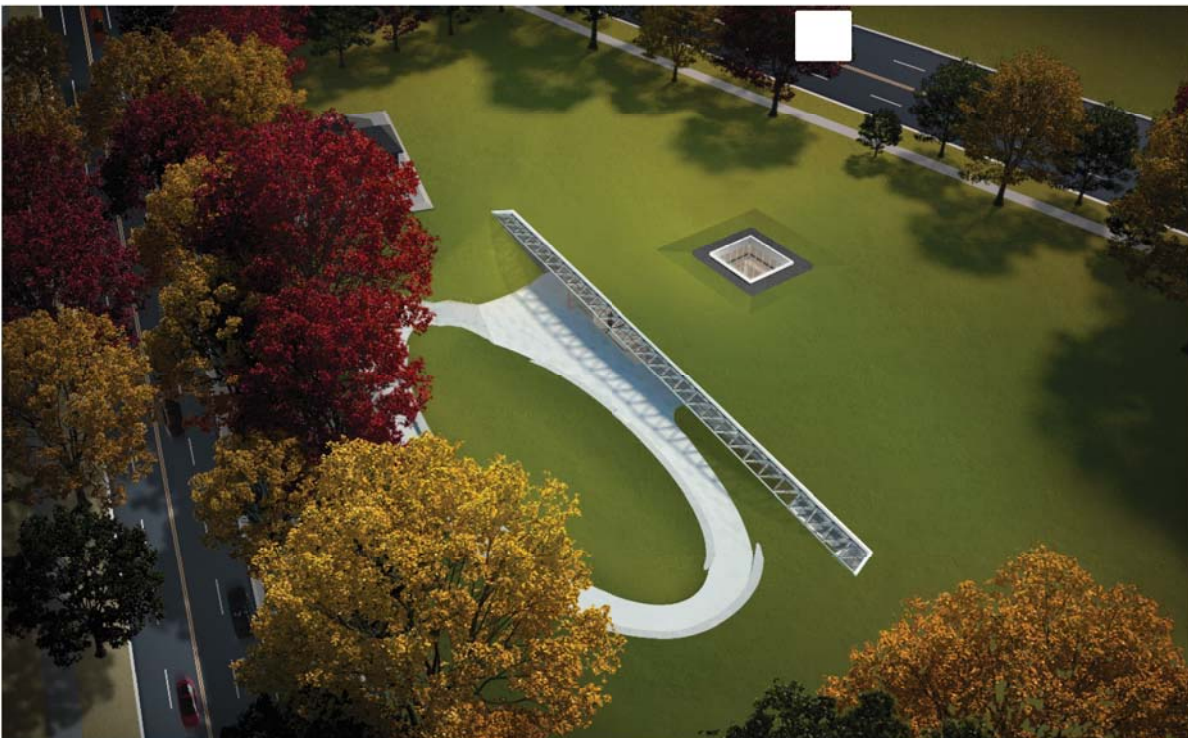


Figure 15: Aerial view of Visitor Center

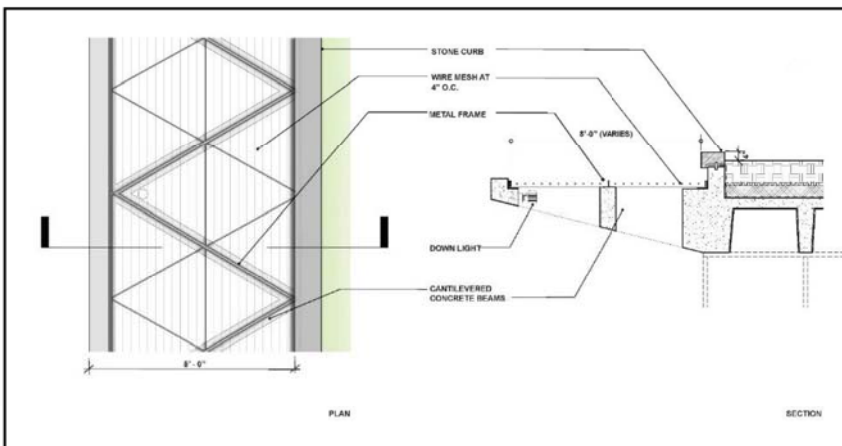


Figure 16: Detail of horizontal rail

#### NCPC Required Mitigation

At the time of site selection NCPC required “the NPS to reconstruct softball fields lost as a result of this project on another site within one-half (1/2) mile of Site A.” This mitigation measure was incorporated into NCPC’s FONSI and was intended to address potential significant adverse effects to recreational resources. NPS issued a FONSI in 2007 for the selection of the site for the Visitor Center and this FONSI states that in order to mitigate the loss of ball fields on the site, the NPS will establish multi-purpose fields south of Independence Avenue and west of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial. Currently, there are multi-purpose fields in this location and NPS is committed to maintaining this recreational resource.

#### Recommendation

Staff acknowledges the challenge of designing an underground facility at this historically significant and sensitive site on the National Mall. In 2003, Congress defined the National Mall as a “completed civic work of art”. The Mall’s spatial layout, circulation pattern, landscape elements, memorials and buildings together create the historic place valued by Americans. The challenge for the project is to achieve a design that balances the creation of an underground Visitor Center with respect for the National Mall. The Commission adopted the design guidelines to protect this nationally significant place during design development of the project and the design guidelines are required mitigation for site selection under NEPA.

As noted above, the overall impact of the facility on the surrounding landscape has been softened by the elimination of the retaining wall and use of sloped grass berms in its place. The overall goal of the design guidelines to minimize the visibility of the facility and its impact on the landscape has been reached. The visibility of the Visitor Center from the Lincoln Memorial and surrounding sidewalks has been minimized by reducing the size of building elements as much as possible. In addition, by incorporating a curved entry ramp that surrounds a grass berm, the sunken entrance has been integrated into the landscape. Staff recommends the Commission **approve the final site and building plans for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center on the Lincoln**



**Memorial Grounds.** In addition, with the modifications made since the Commission approved the preliminary plans, the design continues to satisfy the design guidelines. Staff recommends that the Commission **confirm that the final design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center is consistent with the design guidelines adopted during site selection.** With respect to the increase in size of the horizontal rail, staff has requested and the National Park Service has agreed to continue to consult on the finish and color of the horizontal rail with appropriate review agencies. Staff is recommending that the Commission **note that the horizontal rail has increased in size since the Commission's preliminary approval and that the National Park Service has agreed to consult further on the finishes and color selection for this element with appropriate review agencies.**

#### Sustainability

A geothermal well system will provide the building's heating and cooling needs. Geothermal technology minimizes the need for air intake grilles along the surface and eliminates the need for a cooling tower thereby reducing the visibility of the mechanical equipment on the site.

The applicant submitted a stormwater management plan. The existing site area is approximately 2.35 acres, all of which is pervious area (lawn, trees, etc.). With the construction of the Visitor Center, the site will be approximately 2.13 acres pervious and 0.22 acres impervious. To manage stormwater, a green roof has been incorporated into the building design. Stormwater will also be diverted to a gray water system located inside the building for reuse. The stormwater runoff from the new entry plaza will be collected via a proposed storm pipe network and will be treated before discharging to the existing storm sewer along Constitution Avenue. In addition, the applicant will continue to work with the District of Columbia Department of the Environment to finalize the stormwater design.

#### Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital

Overall, the project is consistent with policies in the Federal Elements of the Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital, and in particular those contained in the Preservation and Historic Features Element, Parks and Open Space Element, and the Visitor Element. These policies encourage the federal government to preserve and maintain parks and open space, enhance historic designed landscapes while protecting their unique characteristics, and provide educational facilities for visitors. The proposed Visitor Center will satisfy each of these areas.

The Visitor Center has been designed with respect for the historic character of the National Mall and surrounding memorials and monuments. The design of the Visitor Center is sensitive to the context of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and will enhance the contemplative experience of the Memorial. The design is respectful of the surrounding monumental core and will contribute to the special role the monumental core plays in the nation's capital. In addition, views to and from the Lincoln Memorial as well as the view sheds of streets surrounding the project site will be protected as an integral part of the national capital's image. The exterior lighting of the Visitor Center will respect the existing night lighting hierarchy of monuments, memorials, museums, and other prominent features on the National Mall.

The Visitor Center is consistent with the parks and open space policies pertaining to monumental and designed landscape parks. With its location in West Potomac Park, the Visitor Center will contribute to the extension of the Mall as a valuable open space and create a special environment for formal and informal gatherings. A portion of the site will also remain available for passive and active recreation. By minimizing the impact of the Visitor Center on the grounds of the Lincoln Memorial, the integrity of a nationally significant historic landscape will be maintained. Finally, the project conforms to policies in the Visitor Element as the Visitor Center will provide an opportunity for the public to gain a greater understanding of the Vietnam War and those who served the country during the war.

### **National Mall Plan**

The National Mall Plan seeks to rehabilitate and refurbish the National Mall so that very high levels of use can be perpetuated and the needs of all visitors and users can be met in an attractive, high-quality, energy-efficient, and sustainable manner. The National Mall Plan establishes a framework to protect memorials and landscapes while maintaining large areas of unprogrammed open space. The plan seeks to balance contemporary uses while respecting the planned historic landscapes of the L'Enfant and McMillan plans. The plan acknowledges the Visitor Center as a project authorized by Congress that will be implemented to educate visitors on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Vietnam War.

### **National Capital Urban Design and Security Plan Objectives and Policies**

The Commission's policies on urban design and security discourage locating physical perimeter security elements in public space. NPS has proposed minimal security elements for the Visitor Center based on a threat assessment conducted by the U.S. Park Police. Security elements include the installation of bollards at the top of the curved entry ramp along the sidewalk on Henry Bacon Drive. The seat walls along the curved ramp have been designed to protect against an errant vehicle that may veer off course. The ha-ha detail around the courtyard opening has also been designed to address safety and security concerns.

### **National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)**

NCPC and NPS each have an independent responsibility to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA); NCPC's responsibility stems from its approval authority over the project. In accordance with the Council on Environmental Quality's rules for implementing NEPA, and the Commission's Environmental and Historic Preservation Policies and Procedures, NPS prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) for the project, to which NCPC was a cooperating agency. The EA analyzed a no action alternative and two development alternatives; the preferred alternative was identified as "Alternative 2." Topics analyzed in the EA include: cultural resources, visitor use and experience, park operations and management, soils, transportation systems, vegetation, and utilities. NPS issued a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for Alternative 2 on June 25, 2012. On June 27, 2012, the NCPC Executive Director issued a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for "Alternative 2".



### **National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA)**

NCPC and NPS each have an independent responsibility to comply with the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA); NCPC's responsibility stems from its approval authority over the project. NPS initiated consultation with the District of Columbia State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) on February 17, 2005, requesting comments on the Site Selection Study and Environmental Analysis. Section 106 consultation did not conclude at the time of site selection but continued from 2005-2012 and 6 consultation meetings were held.

NPS determined that the construction of the Visitor Center would have an adverse effect on the L'Enfant Plan of the City of Washington, East and West Potomac Park Historic District, the Lincoln Memorial and Grounds cultural landscape, and the American Pharmacists Association Building. Following the determination of effect, NCPC designated NPS lead agency for Section 106 compliance. NPS, NCPC, SHPO, ACHP, and VVMF executed a Memorandum of Agreement to resolve the adverse effects. The MOA stipulates that the night lighting shall not exceed the minimum levels required by building code and lighting safety standards so that the Visitor Center's night lighting does not affect the visual prominence of the Lincoln Memorial or the night lighting hierarchy of the other monuments and memorials, the museums, and other prominent features on the National Mall. The MOA also stipulates that the landscape plan for the Visitor Center will be revised in accordance with the recommendations of the 1999 Lincoln Memorial Cultural Landscape Report. Landscape design for the Visitor Center will minimize the addition of non-historic plant material (including trees, shrubs, and ground cover) and incorporate American elm trees, as needed, in the concentric rows of elms planted around Lincoln Circle and in the rows of adjacent street trees. Landscape rehabilitation will reestablish, on two sides of Lincoln Circle (north and south), the intent of the original implemented historic planting plan for the Lincoln Memorial and Grounds. Finally, the MOA stipulates that VVMF will provide funds to NPS so that NPS can complete a Cultural Landscape Inventory and update the National Register nomination for the Lincoln Memorial and Grounds.

## **II. CONSULTATION**

### **National Capital Memorials Advisory Committee**

Section 8905(a)(1) of the Commemorative Works Act requires memorial sponsors to consult with the National Capital Memorials Advisory Committee (NCMAC) on the selection of alternative sites and design concepts prior to submitting the project to NCPC for formal design review. In fulfillment of this requirement, VVMF presented the preferred design concept at the March 29, 2012 NCMAC meeting. In general, the Commission expressed support for the project, but some Commission members felt that the visitor center was taking on a larger role and competing with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Commission members expressed that while the Visitor Center should support the visitors' experience at the Memorial, the Visitor Center should not give the impression that it is being elevated to be an independent destination and of a scale which would compete with the commemorative landscape. Commission members also felt the long horizontal canopy over the recessed courtyard entry should be reconsidered to reduce its visibility in the landscape.

The Commission also complimented the palette of materials which had been chosen as they felt it would give the visitor center a character more reflective of the subtlety of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Some Commission members questioned the value and pattern of triangular skylights (these have been removed from the design), encouraging the sponsor to reconsider the use of skylights particularly since the visitor center would also rely on artificial lighting and high-quality indoor lighting is widely available. Commission members reminded the sponsor that the design guidelines adopted by NCPC and CFA directed that no lighting would encroach upon the views from the Lincoln Memorial. One Commission member recommended the NPS consider relocating the food service kiosk as there was concern that the kiosk would be in a discordant location with the Visitor Center once the center was open. Finally, some members expressed discomfort at the level of detailed technical review that was prompted by this consultation.

Pursuant to the Commemorative Works Act, no approval action was taken by NCMAC, but the NCMAC provided a written summary of members' consultative comments to the VVMF.

#### **Coordinating Committee**

The Committee forwarded the proposed final site and building plans to the Commission with the statement that the project has been coordinated with all participating agencies, except NCPC. The representative for NCPC expressed concern about the length of the horizontal rail. The participating agencies were: the District of Columbia Office of Planning; the District of Columbia State Historic Preservation Office; the District Department of Transportation; the General Services Administration; the National Park Service; and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.

#### **U.S. Commission of Fine Arts**

The Commission of Fine Arts reviewed the final site and building plans design at its May 21, 2015 meeting. CFA approved the final plans and expressed appreciation for the attention to design details throughout the development of the project. CFA noted that the elimination of the retaining wall beside the entrance was an improvement that simplified the design and lessened the visual similarity with the actual memorial. CFA supported the proposed design for consistent, even slopes generally in the areas of turf surrounding the Visitor Center's entrance area.