

Rock Creek Park

U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service



Nature Center Complex Development Concept Plan Shape the Future of Rock Creek Park

November 2016



The National Park Service is preparing a Development Concept Plan/Environmental Assessment for the Nature Center Complex of Rock Creek Park, which includes the Nature Center, Horse Center, Maintenance Area, and their surroundings. The plan will identify needed improvements to buildings, picnic areas, and trails. In addition, the plan will provide 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 will also address how to support ongoing operations and maintenance.

We invite you to attend a public open house and share ideas and questions about the plan during the 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 comment card,
- via the project website at <http://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 January 31, 2017.

Rock Creek Park manages 2,749 acres within the District of Columbia, including the core of Rock Creek Park and many other diverse parks across the city, including Dumbarton Oaks, Georgetown Waterfront Park, and Meridian Hill. Established in 1890, Rock Creek Park is one of the first national parks created in the United States and is America's first urban national park. It contains an amphitheater, tennis center, horse center, and boathouses, and it is the only national park with a planetarium. The park protects 9.6 miles of Rock Creek and its associated natural landscape, a number of historic structures, historically significant designed landscapes, archeological sites, and Civil War-era fortifications. As the largest green space within Washington, DC, Rock Creek Park offers a variety of popular recreational activities, including hiking, cycling, horseback riding, boating, bird watching, organized sports, and the opportunity for relaxation and rejuvenation in a quiet, natural atmosphere.

Join us at a public open house!

Wednesday, November 16

Open house from 6:30pm to 8:00pm

Short presentation at 7:00pm

Chevy Chase Library, 5625 Connecticut Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20015

Thursday, November 17

Open house from 6:30pm to 8:00pm

Short presentation at 7:00pm

Josephine Butler Park Center, 2437 15th St., NW
Washington, DC 20009

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



Purpose and Need

Purpose

The purpose of the Development Concept Plan 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 other nearby surroundings including picnic areas #13 and #14 and trails. Proposed improvements will protect park resources and enhance the visitor experience while ensuring that the long-run 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 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 historic district, does not make optimal use of its existing square footage and limits its use for community gatherings and potential revenue generation. 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 will outline a series of targeted capital improvements that will 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 will be financed within the constraints of available project funds from the NPS and its partner groups.



Images from top to bottom:

1. Picnic Area #13
2. Nature Center
3. Horse Center
4. Maintenance Area

Financial Strategy

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



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 to have many opportunities to learn about and enjoy the area, with current recreational uses maintained. Expand and enhance site amenities, address visitor safety concerns, and make needed accessibility improvements for rehabilitated buildings and trails.

Access and Circulation

Enhance and improve multimodal access and 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 area, with special focus on the water quality of Rock Creek through improved stormwater 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.

Images from top to bottom:

1. Junior Ranger camp
2. Birdwatching
3. Park signage
4. Nature Center exhibits

Development of Preliminary Alternative Concepts

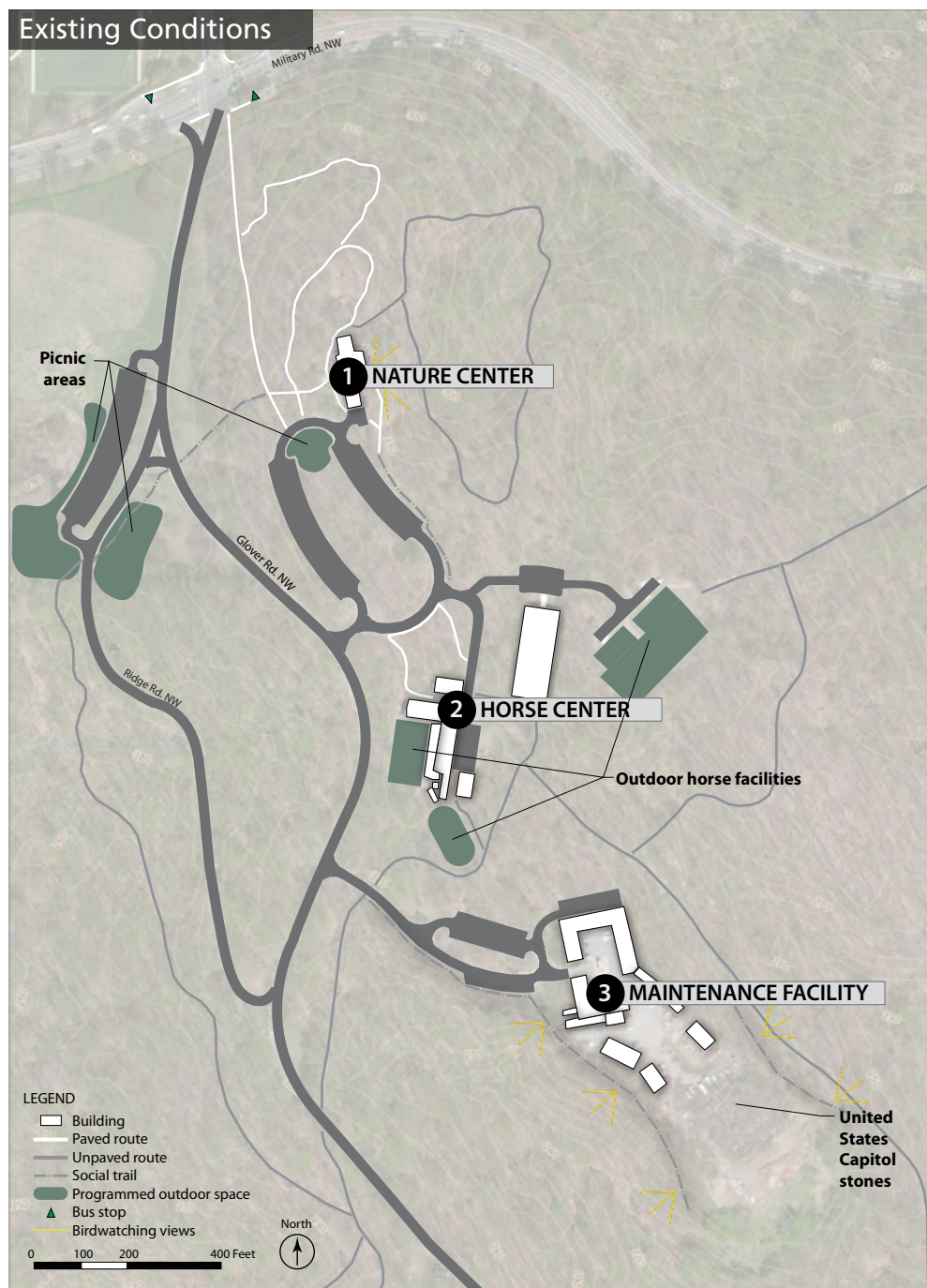
The preliminary concepts were developed during the internal scoping process, taking into consideration known issues and opportunities, including:

- Park, partner, and visitor uses
- Existing, aged facilities
- Cultural resource considerations
- Pedestrian, bicycle, equestrian, and vehicular access

These preliminary concepts will be used to develop alternatives for the environmental assessment.

Concept 1: No Action

In this concept, Rock Creek Park would continue present management practices, with an ongoing routine of 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 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 General Service Administration standards. Any renovations or improvements would make use of sustainable and technology. A number of actions would be taken to encourage visitors to stay and explore the area.

Nature Center

In all action concepts, exhibits and programming would be expanded in accordance with the park’s interpretive themes. Other actions would include:

- Flooding at the planetarium would be resolved. The planetarium seats, lighting, electrical, HVAC systems, and dome would be improved.
- The lower level auditorium would be improved to increase flexibility of the space for uses such as classrooms and community meetings. The floor would be made flat and a new indoor entrance ramp would improve access.
- The lower level would also include a new catering kitchen to serve the auditorium and adjacent outdoor classroom space.
- A new elevator would provide access to all floors of the Nature Center and planetarium.

Horse Center

In all action concepts, interior spaces would be renovated for the safety and health of horses, visitors, and staff and to enhance the character of the area and make the most efficient use of space. The Horse Center would welcome visitors through interpretive and recreational programming, volunteer programs, and viewing of equestrian activities. Other actions would include:

- The current deteriorating indoor riding ring would be replaced with larger indoor/outdoor structure to improve riding conditions.
- Picnic benches with views to the horse riding areas, and interpretive waysides would welcome visitors and interpret the current and historic use of horses within the park.
- The horse stables would be renovated for the safety and health of horses, visitors, and staff.
- A new office structure and inviting arrival plaza would be constructed.

Maintenance Area

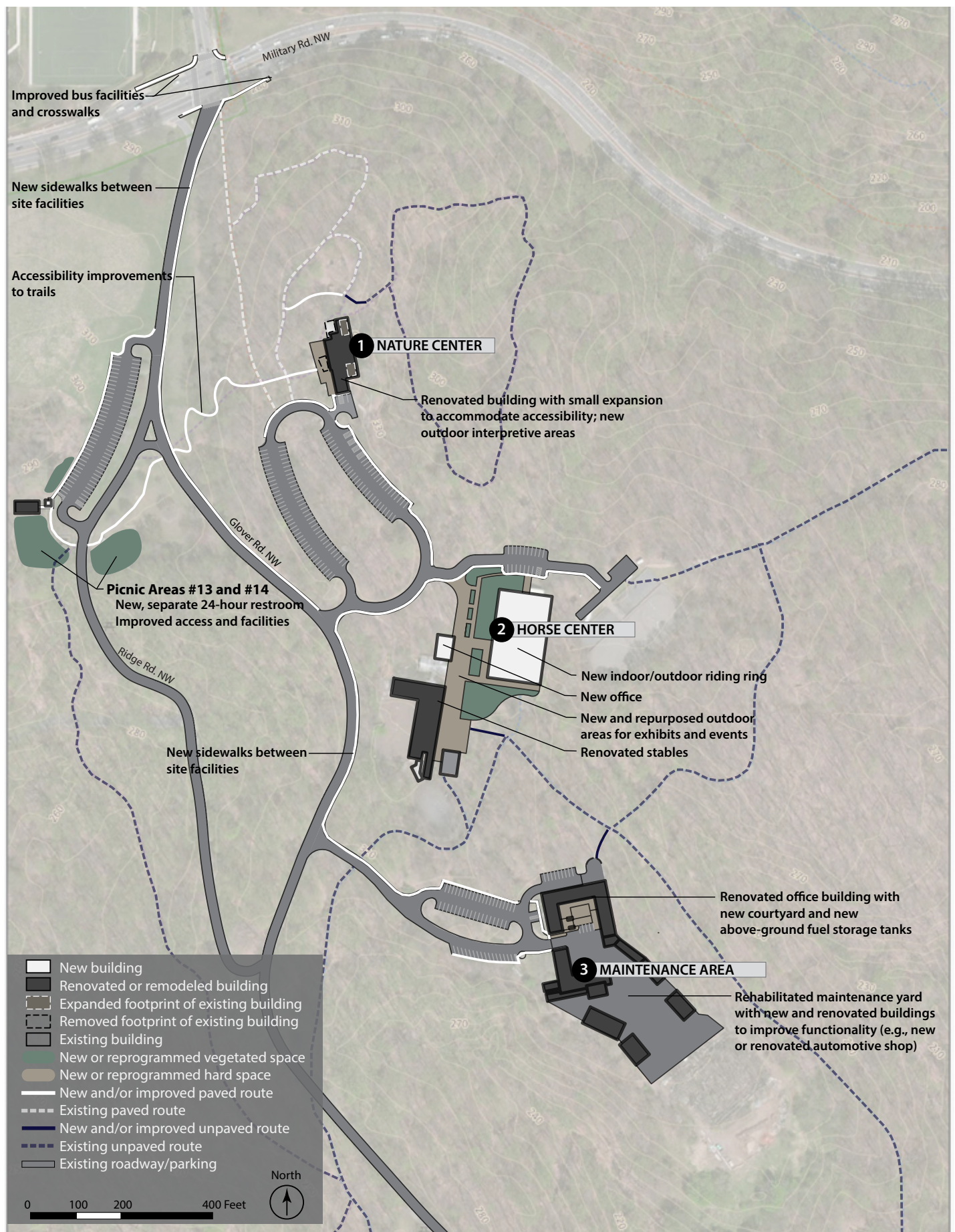
In all action concepts, internal office and warehouse spaces would be reconfigured to more effectively meet functional and operational needs. Also restrooms, locker, and shower areas would be renovated to address accessibility and improve functionality. Opportunities would be explored to move the U.S. Capitol stones off site. Improvements would include energy efficient mechanical building systems.

Other Site Improvements

In all action concepts, site improvements would enhance visitor recreational and learning opportunities and focus on accessibility, safety, trail and path connections, and multimodal access to the area. In addition to sidewalk and crosswalk completion between public transit stops and site facilities, all concepts would include:

- New shelter structure at Picnic Area #14; new composting restrooms would be provided in this area to support Picnic Areas #13 and #14.
- Improved wayfinding, signage, and park information would be provided at site facilities, trails, and at nearby bus stops.
- Park staff would examine improved security features.
- Site improvements would showcase sustainable technology and best practices.
- Facilities may be provided.
- Parking meters and electric vehicle charging stations may be installed.

Concept 2: Fix It



Concept 2: Fix It

This concept improves the site functionality for visitors, volunteers, partner organizations, and park staff. Building interiors would be renovated and reconfigured to enhance visitor experiences and improve operational use. Building footprints would remain the same, except where accessibility improvements cannot be easily accommodated within the existing spaces.

Nature Center

In addition to the actions under common to all, under this concept only small building footprint expansions would be considered if needed to accommodate accessibility improvements. Other actions would include:

- Reconfigured space at the main level of the Nature Center would include a larger and accessible information counter area and larger sales area.
- New outdoor interpretive deck at back wall of exhibit area for expanded exhibit space and expansive views.
- New 24/7 restroom structure in the vicinity of the Nature Center.
- Parking would remain as is.
- Some loss of exhibit and office space would occur to accommodate accessibility improvements.

Horse Center

Same as common to all.

Maintenance Area

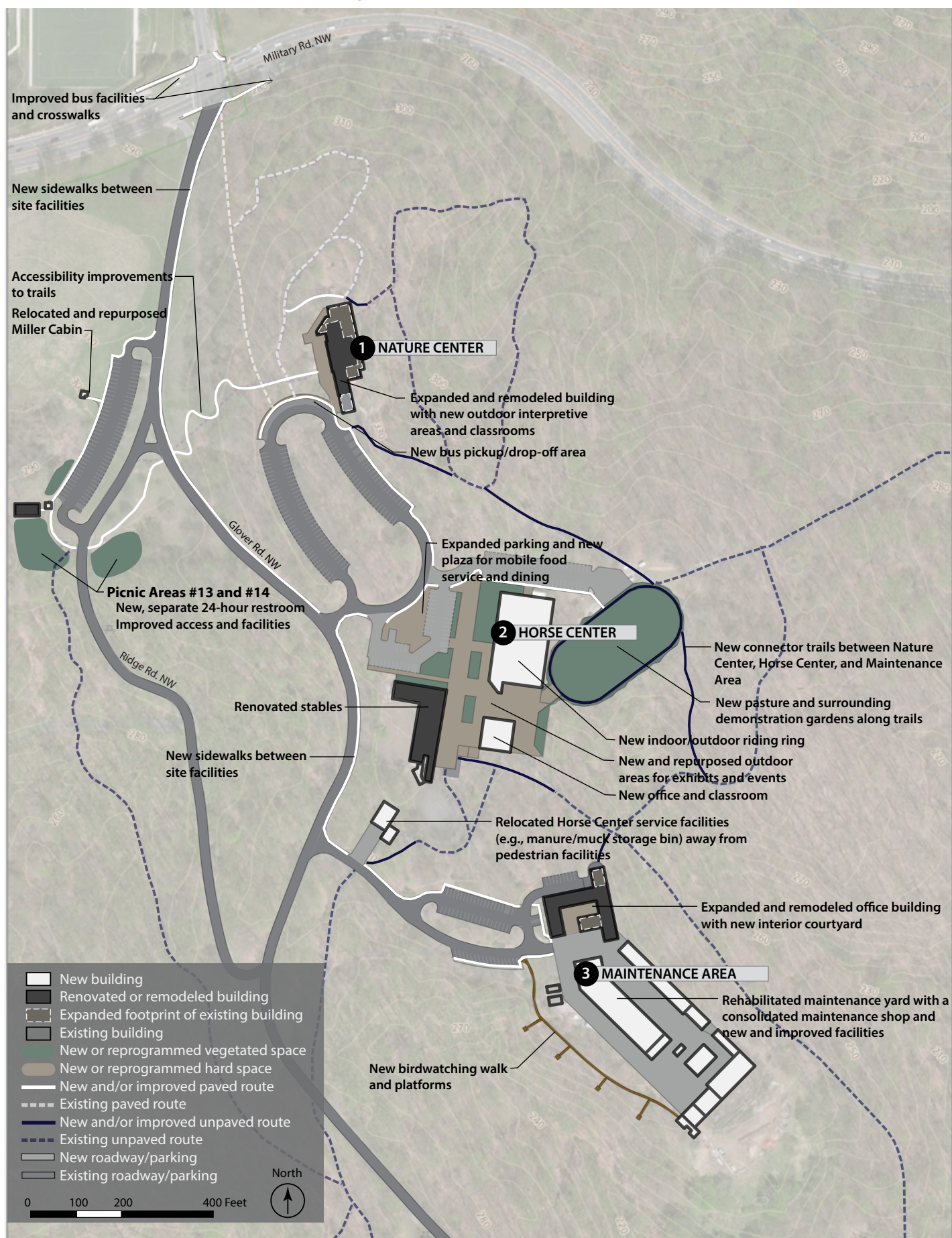
In addition to the actions under common to all, key areas of the maintenance yard would be rehabilitated to improve functionality, including a new automotive shop building and a new, covered waste and recycling building. A landscaped courtyard would be constructed between the east and west wings of the maintenance building.

Other Site Improvements

Same as common to all.



Concept 3: Escape from the City



Concept 3: Escape from the City

This concept focuses on Rock Creek Park as a quiet refuge from the bustling District of Columbia. Visitor programs and activities would be dispersed throughout the site, providing a quiet and contemplative experience. This concept also includes expanded educational outreach and improved amenities for community members and partners. This concept would include new opportunities for guided tours and ranger talks, classes at the new planetarium, and stewardship projects associated with the greenhouse and nursery. The park would support health and education of the community. 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 under concept 2, this concept would include expanded outdoor experiences and educational and interpretive programming. Other actions would include:

- A new and larger planetarium would be considered to support a broad range of educational programs and to connect visitors with the night sky.
- A new multipurpose room on the upper level for park and public use.
- New building addition for interpretive staff offices, constructed within the limits of the existing accessible parking area.
- Covered outdoor classroom area.
- The parking lot would include a bus drop-off area.

Horse Center

In addition to the actions under common to all, this concept would provide a comprehensive look at the Horse Center facilities to identify priority improvements for horses, visitors, and staff. This concept would explore re-siting of non-historic facilities and repurposing those areas to maximize efficiency and flow through the site. Other actions would include:

- New multi-purpose classroom structure for educational and summer camp programs.
- Public viewing area at the new riding ring.
- New pasture area with surrounding demonstration gardens.
- Mobile food service plaza and patio dining area.
- Relocate horse center service facilities away from pedestrian areas.

Maintenance Area

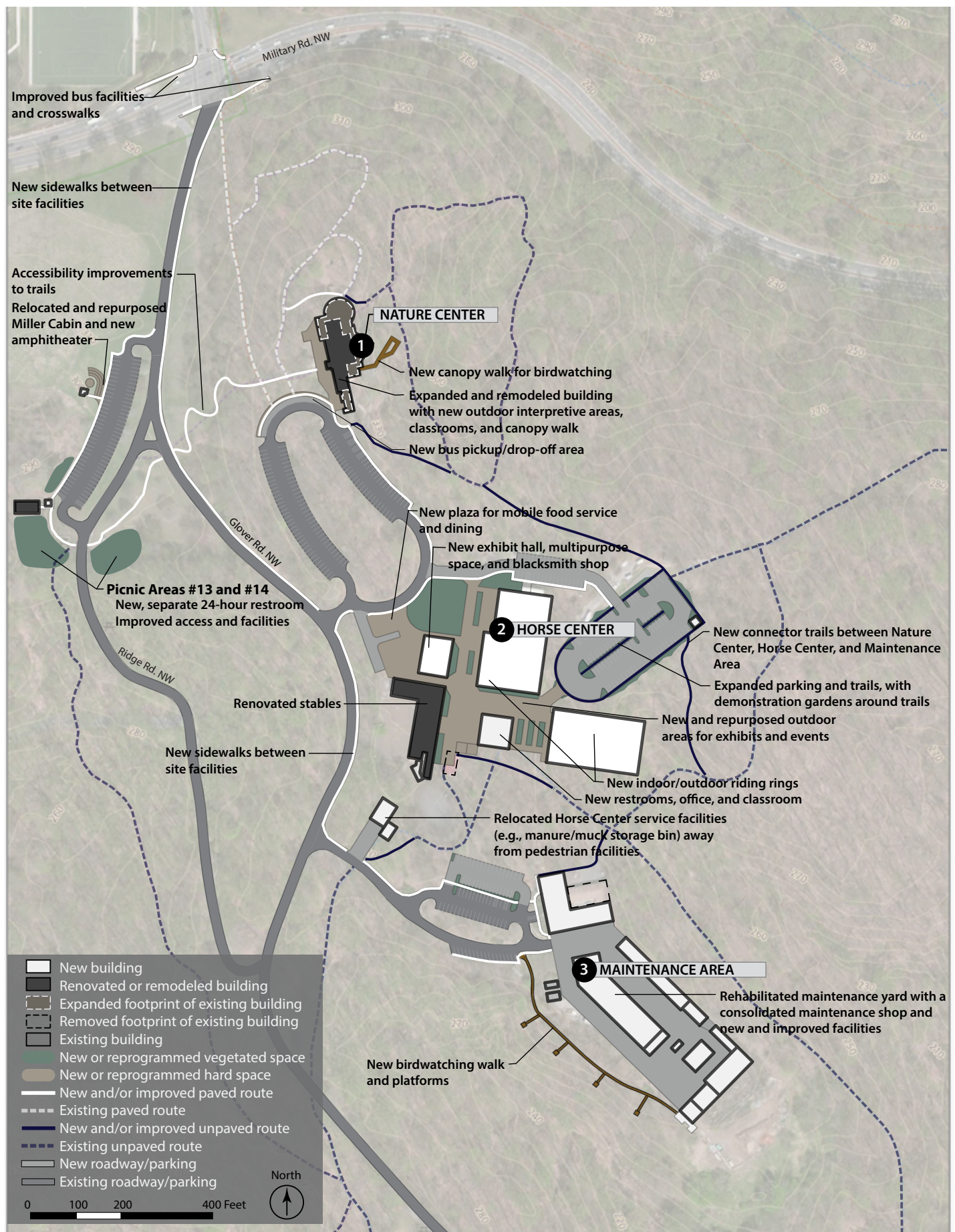
In addition to the actions under concept 2, additions and renovations to the maintenance area would be made to accommodate staff, partner, and public uses. Other actions would include:

- A new, large multi-purpose room for staff, public meetings, and events would be created.
- An updated kitchen area would be available for events and meetings taking place at the park.
- Visitor access around the perimeter of the maintenance facility would be provided to support and enhance bird watching in the area through observation platforms.
- A new maintenance shop building that would consolidate many of the structures in the maintenance yard.
- A new metal structure to store and protect park vehicles, heavy equipment and materials, snowplow blades, waste, and salt.
- A new vehicle and heavy equipment wash pad.
- A new greenhouse and nursery for native plants, sourced from seeds in the park to help maintain local/native species.

Other Site Improvements

In addition to the actions under common to all, visitors' connections to the outdoors would be emphasized through additional birding opportunities. The Miller Cabin may be relocated from its current location within a floodplain to the area just north of Picnic Area #13. The building could be repurposed for exhibits and/or programming.

Concept 4: Green Campus



Concept 4: Green Campus

This concept creates a sustainable campus for park operations, resources, and visitor learning. It would showcase the latest technology for least impact on the environment, striving for net zero emissions in an urban environment. Visitor experience would focus on dynamic exhibits of nature and education about sustainability in a walkable campus easily reached with multimodal access. This concept would include new opportunities for guided tours and ranger talks, urban campfires, classes at the new planetarium, and stewardship projects associated with the greenhouse and nursery. Community gathering and presentation space, classrooms that educate and embolden children and young adults, and events that enhance and bolster the nearby community would be provided.

Nature Center

In addition to the actions under concept 3, the Nature Center and planetarium would accommodate additional programming to draw new and repeat visitors. In order to do this, the building would likely need to be expanded or rebuilt. Serving as a first national park experience for many, the building would evoke a national park lodge, with stone fireplaces, and comfortable places for observing the outdoors with the aim of connecting visitors to the greater national park system. Other actions would include:

- A larger multipurpose room would allow for events such as guest lectures and weddings.
- New canopy walk to enhance bird watching and explore the unique ecosystems within the tree canopy.
- Instead of a new 24/7 stand-alone restroom in the vicinity of the Nature Center, restrooms would be connected to the Nature Center building with entrances from the outdoors and indoors.

Horse Center

In addition to the actions under concept 3, the Horse Center would be upgraded and expanded to improve conditions for boarded horses and to enhance equestrian and other visitor experiences. The Horse Center buildings would visibly connect with the Nature Center to draw visitor interest from one area to the other. As with the other campus buildings, upgrades would focus on sustainable building and site improvements, meeting LEED building standards. Other actions would include:

- Similar to concept 3, this concept would include a new multipurpose classroom structure for educational programs and summer camp program; however, it would be larger and have a catering kitchen.
- A second indoor/outdoor riding ring for the therapeutic riding program.
- New exhibit hall, multipurpose space, and blacksmith shop.
- A larger office building with inviting arrival plaza and grooms quarters with living, sleeping, kitchen, and bathroom areas.
- New separate restroom facility.
- Expanded parking for staff, volunteers, and visitors as well as additional trailer parking spots.

Maintenance Area

In addition to the actions under concept 3, this concept would allow for a rebuilt 2-story maintenance office building to meet facility management and park operational needs, to provide offices for staff and partners, and to invite visitor and public use with laboratory, classroom, and meeting space. The maintenance office building would have a public facing front side. The building would include office space for maintenance, resources, and headquarters staff, including all staff now located at Klinge Mansion. Klinge Mansion could then be offered as a leased space for partners or events. Sustainable technology would be showcased wherever feasible. Other actions would include:

- A new vehicle and heavy equipment wash pad.
- A new greenhouse and nursery for native plants, sourced from seeds in the park to help maintain genotypes.

Other Site Improvements

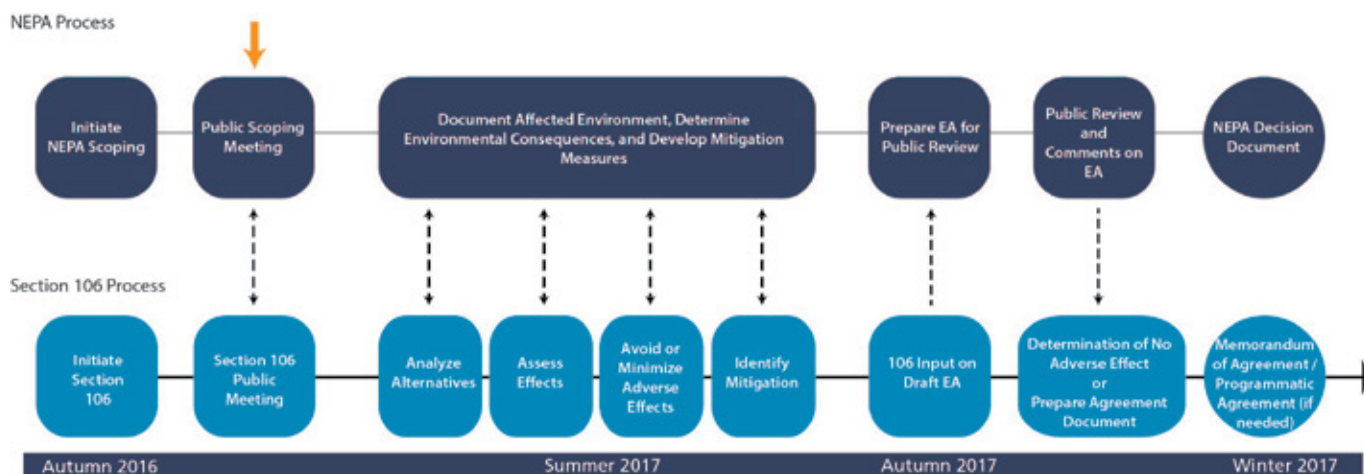
In addition to the actions under concept 3, site improvements would enhance the park's connection to the national park system including:

- A new small, intimate amphitheater near the newly relocated Miller Cabin to offer additional national park experiences.
- The National Park Service would pursue opportunities to offer shuttle services to connect with nearby attractions such as the National Zoo, Peirce Mill, the Georgetown Waterfront Park, and other sites.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)

NEPA requires all federal agencies to consider and document the potential impacts of management actions on the human environment. The National Park Service (NPS) applies NEPA 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 utilizes 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 impact. 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 and share ideas and questions about the plan during the 30-day public comment period. Please share your thoughts on the following question:

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Please provide comments by **January 31, 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.