

U.S. COMMISSION OF FINE ARTS

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27 October 2017

Dear Mr. Obermesser:

In its meeting of 19 October, the Commission of Fine Arts reviewed a new site selection presentation on potential locations for the proposed National Desert Storm and Desert Shield Memorial. The Commission endorsed further exploration of the two preferred sites—West Potomac Park at 23rd Street and Constitution Avenue, NW, and Walt Whitman Park at 20th and E Streets, NW—as well as recommending that the Belvedere site at the historic Potomac River terminus of Constitution Avenue be included in the next phase of site selection.

The Commission members expressed appreciation for the project team's responsiveness to their concerns raised in the previous review and for the additional presentation on the historic context of the conflict. They identified two distinct narratives that underlie the social and geopolitical importance of Desert Storm and Desert Shield: one of international cooperation among many nations to stop territorial aggression, and another constituting the restoration of a bond between the U.S. military and the American people that was weakened by the Vietnam War. They found that both narratives could be reasonably developed at any of the three sites, and they noted that the role of diplomacy—as represented by the nearby White House, Department of State headquarters building, and U.S. Institute of Peace—could contribute to this theme. In addition, they characterized the conflict as a pivotal moment in our history, coincident with the end of the Cold War, and also as the first major conflict in a series of military engagements in the Middle East and southwestern Asia that continue to this day; ideally, the memorial would convey both retrospective connections to the other 20th-century conflicts as well as anticipate related war memorials of the 21st century.

Regarding the site selection process, the Commission members raised the concern that the project team may have preconceptions about the design of the memorial itself—such as berms and dunes recalling the desert landscape of Kuwait—and that these assumptions may be inhibiting this process. They observed that most of the landscape context of the Mall is in fact shady and verdant; they advised that no site will likely be able to accommodate a design intended to establish quiet contemplation within a constructed landscape literally evocative of desert terrain. They recommended that the riparian Belvedere site be included in the selection process and evaluated for its great potential, with a strong visual connection to Arlington National Cemetery, rather than being rejected for its lack of affinity with the landscape of the Middle East. They emphasized that the E Street site in particular presents an opportunity for both contemplation and active engagement with the surrounding institutions, and having a convenient urban connection along 19th Street to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. In conclusion, they advised that each site will generate different scales and design ideas, and the sites should be evaluated accordingly.

The Commission looks forward to further review of the site selection for this important national memorial. As always, the staff is available to assist you with the next submission.

Sincerely,

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

Thomas E. Luebke, FAIA
Secretary

Rick Obermesser, Acting Regional Director
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cc: Scott Stump, National Desert Storm Memorial Association
Alan Harwood, AECOM
Marcel Acosta, National Capital Planning Commission