

# National Mall Coalition

*[nationalmallcoalition.org](http://nationalmallcoalition.org)*

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## **Testimony before the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts on the Smithsonian’s Revitalization of the Historic Core (RoHC) Plan by the National Mall Coalition**

**June 17, 2021**

The National Mall Coalition supports the Smithsonian’s proposal, in its revised and simplified RoHC plan, to revitalize the Smithsonian Castle and Arts & Industries Building. As stated in our February 2021 letter to the Smithsonian as part of the Section 106 Historic Preservation public consultation process, we appreciate that they have reduced the scope of the original South Mall Campus Plan, and we are in full agreement with the need to upgrade, earthquake-proof, flood-proof, and modernize the historic buildings.

However, we are concerned about aspects of the Smithsonian’s plan, which seem to us to be unnecessarily costly and to accept without question the fragmented planning that threatens the National Mall as a work of civic art.

On June 2<sup>nd</sup> we briefed Smithsonian (SI) staff on the comments and concerns we would be submitting to this Commission for the June 17<sup>th</sup> meeting.

- First, we identify renewable energy and flood mitigation alternatives that satisfy SI needs while also saving millions of dollars in construction, maintenance, and energy costs;
- Second, we describe the benefits and advantages of collaboration among all Mall stakeholders – including National Park Service, National Gallery of Art, General Services Administration (GSA), the public – instead of current fragmented planning, especially for the long-term resiliency of the Mall;
- Third, we ask the CFA, as protector of the visionary legacies of the 1791 L’Enfant Plan and 1901 McMillan Commission Plan, to assist SI in making their plan a model of the kind of comprehensive thinking the American people deserve, in order to sustain our National Mall long into the future.

The National Mall Coalition is an all-volunteer non-profit organization of architects, art historians, urban planners, and concerned citizens founded in Washington, DC, in 2000 to advance long-range planning for the Mall in the tradition of the visionary 1791 L'Enfant Plan and 1901 McMillan Plan and to ensure the Mall's continued vital public role in the capital and in American democracy.

- I. To our first point**, at least two goals of the Smithsonian concept can be simplified or eliminated altogether if the plan were to be coordinated with alternatives provided by the proposed National Mall Underground multi-purpose facility – illustrated below and at [nationalmallunderground.org](http://nationalmallunderground.org). The Smithsonian needs **new heating and cooling facilities** for the entire South Mall Campus area. Project engineers stated during the May 27<sup>th</sup> public consultation meeting that they looked at using geothermal wells but did not have the space. Abandoning consideration of geothermal technology, they have resorted to more conventional systems that require associated cooling towers rising visibly into the historic landscape. The only large unbuilt space – beneath the Mall's grassy panels – is managed by the National Park Service (NPS).
- *One viable and desirable alternative* is the National Mall Underground's field of 1,000 geothermal wells contiguous to the South Mall Campus area and capable of providing more than enough clean energy – 3,000 tons of cooling per hour. The Smithsonian would have direct access to the geothermal wells. *The entire heating/cooling component including intrusive towers can be eliminated from the Smithsonian plan.*

Another SI goal is to **capture stormwater in a new cistern** constructed beneath the Castle.

- The National Mall Underground is specifically designed to function as a stormwater reservoir capable of holding up to 30 million gallons of floodwater, the amount of a 200-year flood. *By adopting this alternative, SI can connect to the Underground and thus have no need for its separate cistern.*
- Other elements of the Underground, including a Mall Visitors Center and irrigation cisterns would also benefit the SI, resulting in a reduction in the size, the number of components, and the costs associated with its plan.

We are currently working with Congressional staff to schedule a hearing on the National Mall Underground infrastructure project.

- II. On to our second point regarding** coordinated as opposed to jurisdiction-based, piecemeal planning. Stormwater flooding is an urgent threat not only to the Smithsonian but to the entire Mall and Federal Triangle area, as we learned during the devastating floods of June 2006. Renewable energy is a mandate for all public buildings on and surrounding the Mall. Irrigation needs extend not only to the Mall's grass and SI's gardens but also to the National Gallery of Art site and other public lands. In short, dealing holistically and collaboratively with these urgent, long-term

needs will benefit all and reduce the threats to the Mall's integrity posed by duplicative projects by each Mall managing agency. The National Mall Underground concept – stormwater cistern, geothermal field, bus and car parking, Visitors Center – has been developed since 2013 in consultation with all Mall stakeholders, including NPS, Smithsonian, GSA, DC Government, and local civic groups. The Coalition's goal was to attempt to consolidate into one facility – and one major multi-purpose infrastructure project – the many shared goals of federal and DC agencies and the American public. The geothermal wells were added, for example, in 2014 at the suggestion of then-GSA Administrator Dan Tangherlini who was looking for open space for a geothermal field. However, the Underground's multi-purpose, across-agency benefits also works to its detriment. NPS staff has expressed opposition to the Underground's car parking for visitors. But should the entire project be rejected, and its benefits be ignored, because one component is objected to, by one of the multiple Mall stakeholders? Isn't it the purpose of the public consultation process (under Section 106 and NEPA) to vet a project like the Underground in open discussion and revise the concept as needed?

Our progress in advancing the National Mall Underground concept is ongoing. In addition to a future Congressional hearing, the US Army Corps of Engineers in 2018 found that "Flood risk from a storm of the intensity that flooded the Federal Triangle area in 2006 could be reduced significantly during a flood event by implementation of the Underground." Also, "revenue potential from parking fees and water credits may offer self-financing opportunities that attracts a public-private partnership." A 2019 Financing Plan commissioned by the Coalition confirmed that "The National Mall Underground can achieve a stormwater mitigation solution at significant cost savings. . . the financing plan uses existing federal contracting authorization programs to pay for this stormwater mitigation over time, avoiding the need for upfront appropriated dollars." Learn more at [National Mall Underground | National Mall Coalition](#).

- III. This brings us to our final point.** The Smithsonian's planning goals and design concept are limited and restricted by the Mall area under its control. But thoughtful, long-range planning for the Mall must not be inhibited by such jurisdiction-based thinking or the result could destroy the unified design and symbolism that are the legacy of the brilliant L'Enfant and McMillan Plans. Our federal planning commissions and DC planning authority are committed to preserving the historic planning legacy of those visionary plans. We urge the Commission of Fine Arts to assist SI in making their plan a model of the kind of comprehensive planning that will sustain our National Mall long into the future. Let us all recall that at turn of 19<sup>th</sup> century the Mall was an unruly, fragmented, overgrown mess with railroad tracks crossing at the foot of Capitol Hill. But by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century the vision of the 1901 McMillan Plan was slowly emerging, creating a great public open landscape framed by dignified public buildings. The Mall at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century had become the

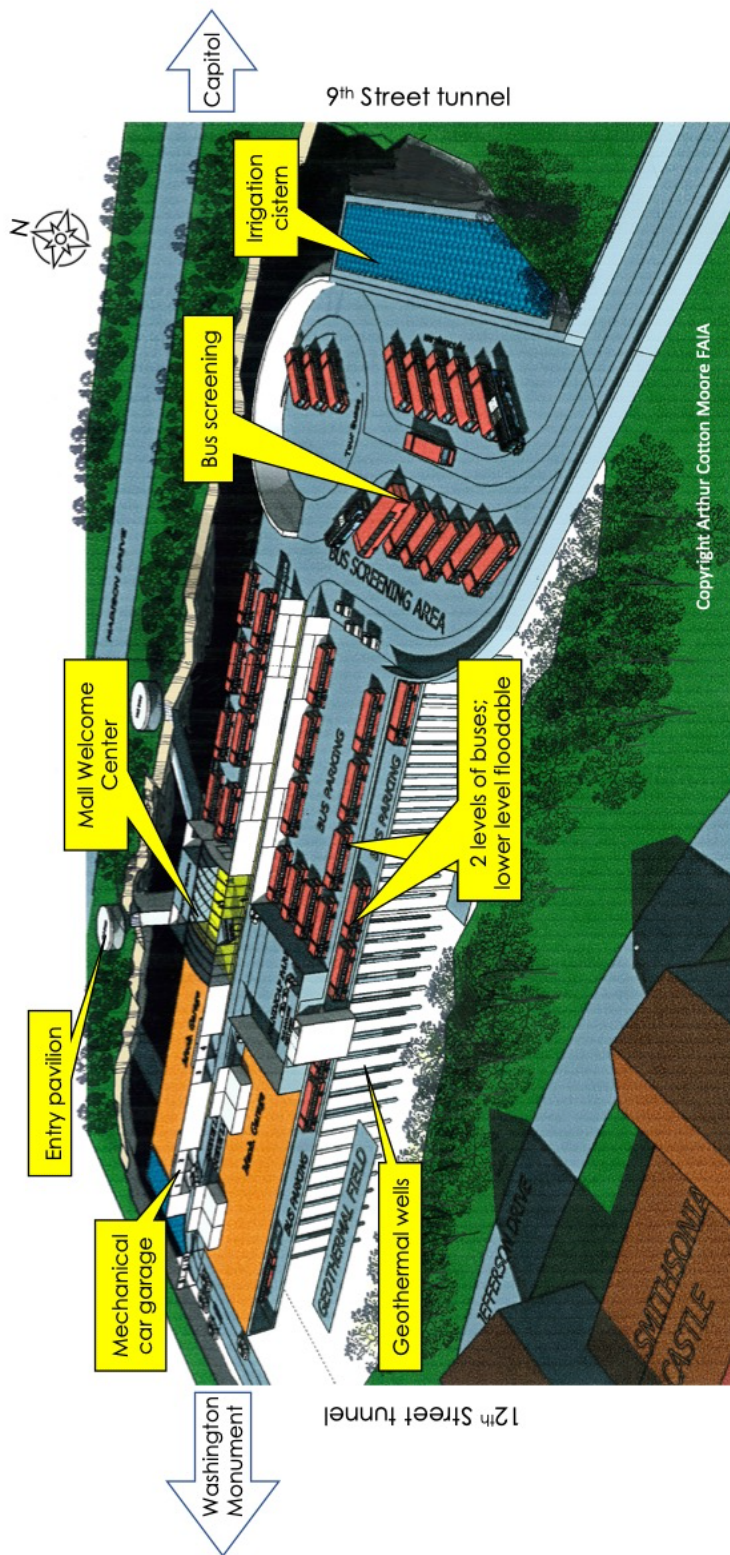
majestic stage for American Democracy (see our *National Mall: Stage for Our Democracy* maps). Now, regretfully, we lack a comprehensive plan comparable in quality to the L'Enfant and McMillan Plans. Currently the Latino American Museum and Women's History Museum are seeking a site on the Mall; other memorials and museums are in the pipeline. What is needed is a cogent forward-looking vision that outlines how the Mall can grow, enhancing its dignified beauty and symbolism. The Smithsonian project can and should be a first step towards a greater vision for our National Mall in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**An annotated diagram of the National Mall Underground is attached below.**

**For the National Mall Coalition:**

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## National Mall Underground: Resiliency for the National Mall

<https://www.nationalmallcoalition.org/innovation/resilience-to-ensure-the-future/>

### Stormwater / Water Resources

- 30-million-gallon stormwater reservoir for 200-year flood (e.g., 2006 Federal Triangle flood)
- Rainwater & groundwater cisterns
- Irrigation water for Mall grass, gardens, trees

### Visitor Services

- Welcome Center for Mall visitors
- Restrooms, food vending, shelter in place
- Bus driver rest station

### Clean Renewable Energy

- 1,000 geothermal wells centrally located under Mall grass
- 3,000 tons of cooling per hour for Smithsonian museums and GSA public buildings

### Intermodal Transportation Facility

- Parking for 600 tour/school buses & 600 cars
- Electric charging station for buses and cars
- Connection to Metro and DC Circulator
- 2 blocks from CSX rail line
- Bicycle/moped rental
- Easy access and coordination across transit modes