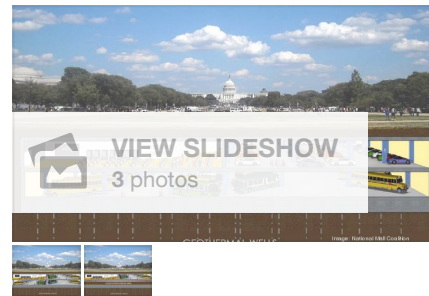


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COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE

National Mall Underground project picks up steam again



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Get ready - the question of underground parking and floodwater prevention at the National Mall has returned to the fore.

Eight years after the National Mall Coalition, a volunteer nonprofit, first designed a project to handle flooding on one of D.C.'s most recognizable sites, the organization made yet another public bid Thursday for its National Mall Underground project, this time to the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts – the latest in a long line of 200-plus meetings with stakeholders and officials that's been years in the making.

The commission is one of several groups that U.S. Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton, D-D.C., and Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., requested to assess and comment on the coalition's proposal. But the presentation was just designed to be informative; the commission didn't issue an endorsement, but rather listened to pass on its review to Norton and Raskin.

In a virtual presentation, famed architect Arthur Cotton Moore, who's vice chair of the National Mall Coalition, and Judy Scott Feldman, its chair, discussed the current design – and public hang-ups – of the project, expected to cost between \$260 million and \$320 million and to be financed through parking fees and stormwater and clean energy tax credits. The fine arts commission will send a letter at the end of next week to Norton and Raskin, who must review the project, Luebke said.

The last time that happened, it didn't make it past Norton's desk. But if she and Raskin OK it this time, they'll pass it along for congressional approval. After that, the proposal would ultimately fall on the desk of President Joe Biden.

Going behind (or underneath) the design

At the core of the group's proposal is a multipurpose underground facility below the Mall to help mitigate what climate scientists anticipate will be a surge in flooding from the Potomac River and Tiber Creek, as well as traffic congestion and pollution from stationary tour buses.

“Now nature is roaring back,” Feldman said. “The urgency to act is real.”

It would lie underneath the grass panels, in between the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History and the Smithsonian Castle. Tour buses and cars would enter through the ramps from Independence Avenue leading into 12th Street and from the Ninth Street tunnel. The current design proposes adding parking for both cars and tour buses to help finance the construction – much of it comes from parking fees – and providing renewable energy to the buildings around the National Mall. The facility would also include a visitors welcome center with restrooms and food options.

It would also entail a stormwater reservoir that could hold 30 million gallons of floodwater. A field of geothermal wells, which extract thermal energy from the Earth’s crust, would provide 3,000 tons per hour of renewable energy, including heating and cooling, to museums and government buildings along the Mall. In addition to the cooling function, irrigation cisterns would reduce the area’s energy footprint, while watering the nearby grass and gardens.

According to the proposal, the lower story of the facility would be vacated during heavy storms to collect flood waters and pump them later into the sewer system.

Construction for the project, to be developed by Albert Small, would close off three blocks between Ninth and 12th streets NW for two years, Feldman said.

Mixed reactions to the proposal

During the meeting, Thomas Luebke, secretary for the commission, read excerpts of letters from the National Park Service and the Smithsonian Institution, whose leaders expressed opposition to the plan's parking component.

The latter two groups had voiced concerns in those letters that the new parking will spike traffic to downtown D.C. without providing enough spots, leading to traffic congestion and frustrated visitors, that it didn't seem feasible to evacuate buses from underground during a storm and that this would raise security issues. Other public stakeholders have aired similar worries in the last several years, including a potential negative effect on Metro ridership.

Members of the commission also recommended that the coalition remove the parking component from the proposal, too, as well as expressed concerns over the project's impact on the National Mall landscape, but said the flood mitigation system should be studied further, according to Luebke.

The coalition has also proposed an alternative design that only allows for buses to park in the facility, though it's unclear how that would impact financing given the lower parking fee revenue. Feldman said during the meeting that it wouldn't make sense to totally eliminate parking from the proposed design because then the coalition would be back at square one for figuring out how to fund the facility.

"We're totally willing to look at alternatives," she said. "I will say, though, that the car and the bus parking help pay for the facility, and if Congress were to throw out millions of dollars in infrastructure and we didn't need to fund it that way, then we could compromise.

"Ultimately, it's Congress that can say this is a project that benefits everybody," Feldman added. "And, yes, it's going to

have some negative effects, but in the past eight years, we've been addressing those negative effects by trying to amend the design. We've amended it along with different government agencies."

Commissioner Rodney Mims Cook said compared with previous solutions to move bus parking to Anacostia to avoid National Mall congestion, this underground proposal would be much closer and more convenient and result in less pollution from tour buses circling and idling in the area.

"I don't see how we have any other choice," Cook said. "Flooding is a problem, and there's no other place to go."

Commissioner James McCrery suggested this could cut down on concerns of police officers enforcing parking laws for tour buses. But he opposed the visitors center, calling it "absurd" to force visitors to head underground in order to be welcomed into the city. Indeed, Luebke said the commission recommended removing the visitors center from the project.

The U.S. Commission of Fine Arts is the independent federal agency that oversees the design and aesthetics of D.C.'s construction. All but one of the commissioners were present for Thursday afternoon's hearing, including Chair Billie Tsien, Vice Chair Hazel Ruth Edwards, and members Mims Cook, McCrery, Justin Garrett Moore and Peter Cook.

This story has been updated to clarify that the Commission of Fine Arts was asked by two members of Congress to review the project and pass along its comments.

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