

THE NATIONAL MALL THIRD CENTURY INITIATIVE

Testimony before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on National Parks
April 12, 2005

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee for conducting this hearing today and providing us with an opportunity to present our views on the Third Century Mall. We appreciate and admire the leadership you have brought to this subject.

The Third Century Mall Initiative, a project of the National Coalition to Save Our Mall, is a volunteer organization dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of the National Mall for future generations.

Over the last 18 months through a series of public forums and meetings, the public has spoken very strongly about their concerns about the state of the Mall, as well as their strong interest in preserving it in a lasting fashion for its Third Century.

The National Mall represents the legacy of two great visions, the L'Enfant Plan of 1791 and the McMillan Plan of 1901-1902. For 200 years L'Enfant's original concept of the Mall as symbol of our founding ideals and place of the People has been changing and growing to meet the needs of our democracy. Today, with the Mall facing urgent issues and problems, we need to renew the Mall's historic concept and plan for the next one hundred years.

We have three main points:

1. As the Nation grew and evolved, the Mall took on new meaning for the public in the twentieth century.

Its public open space became the stage for our democracy—a place of celebration, recreation, demonstration, and healing. Today's Mall is as much about public use of the open space as it is about memorials and museums. But increasingly the Mall is being treated as a theme park, to be experienced by tour bus. We need to create policies that enhance public use rather than restrict it.

2. The existing Mall is not visitor friendly.

When your constituents come to the Mall this summer, they're going to find barriers, too few places to sit, lack of convenient and good food, and long walks in the hot sun to get from place to place. The Mall needs more visitor amenities and things to do in the public open space.

3. The Mall is full.

Congress recognized this problem and issued a moratorium on further memorials and visitor centers. It declared the Mall a “substantially completed work of civic art.” The National Capital Planning Commission named numerous new building sites around the city with its Memorials and Museums Master Plan. But history can’t be stopped. Dozens of memorial projects are already waiting for sites. Future generations will want to build memorials and some will deserve a place “on the Mall.” The Mall should expand to meet this need, as it did a century ago.

In short, the National Mall needs a vision to carry us into the next 100 years—a Third Century Mall. The vision should recover and renew the Mall’s historic concept as the People’s place. And it should allow the Mall to expand and continue to commemorate our nation’s memories in inspiring memorials and majestic public open space.

There is room to expand. Readily available federal open land with public rights of way such as South Capitol Street and the L’Enfant Promenade would create a continuous route from the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial along a two-mile stretch of the Potomac riverfront. We need only to bridge the Washington Channel to complete the loop. This concept, devised by the National Mall Third Century Initiative, would be as sensitive to today’s environment as was the Beaux-Arts/City Beautiful concept to McMillan.

This sketch is not offered as a formal design, rather as a vision. There are many other possibilities for such an expansion.

In order to plan for the Mall’s future, we also need to confront certain administrative problems.

1. The Mall is undefined.

The Initiative found that there is no agreement as to where the Mall begins and where it ends. The Congressional Research Service confirms this finding. The Mall needs to be defined.

2. Management of the Mall is fragmented.

At least seven separate agencies have management authority over the Mall. The Mall needs a coordinating body.

As the ultimate steward of the Mall, Congress has an important role to play in determining the future of this national treasure. Accordingly, we call upon Congress to take the following long-term and short-term actions.

LONG TERM: Congress should establish a National Mall Conservancy or a Board of Regents. This entity would establish policies for the entire Mall in collaboration with the federal stakeholder agencies and the public and would continually review and update those policies. Similar to the Board of Regents for the Smithsonian Institution--which

Congress recently directed to solve site selection for the African-American Museum--this Board would strengthen Congressional oversight of the Mall. It should be composed of members of Congress and distinguished Americans—historians, business leaders, planners, artists, and educators of national stature.

The Board should be authorized by Congress to be responsible for long-term master planning, including:

1. Assembling a year-long, McMillan-type Planning Commission to develop a long-term vision for the next 100 years—the Third Century Mall. The vision would include enhancing the existing Mall as well as expanding it to create a Third Century Mall. Once completed, that framework would be used by all stakeholders as well as by the review agencies to guide future development.
2. Developing policies such as Mall-wide security, access, permits, public use, transportation, parking, and visitor amenities.
3. Reporting regularly to Congress on the state of the Mall.

SHORT TERM: There are several steps Congress could take now while the Conservancy or Board of Regents is being formed. We ask Congress to immediately:

- 1. Draft legislation that declares the National Mall a single entity encompassing all the lands under the jurisdiction of the various stakeholder agencies and extending from the Capitol to the banks of the Potomac.**

The legislation should take note of the evolving nature of the Mall and allow for its future expansion. This statutory definition would form the basis of all future planning.

- 2. Authorize several pilot projects to make the Mall more visitor friendly.**

The Third Century Initiative has already begun work to answer some of the Mall's needs. We are now completing our first project—a first-ever Mall map and historic guide. The Initiative is funding this project as a public service.

We ask Congress to authorize the Third Century Initiative to develop, coordinate with the National Park Service and other stakeholders, and implement a few short-term, trial projects, some of which could be in place for this summer. These projects could be evaluated after three months and either renewed or retired. A priority would be a trial food cart and park furniture program, perhaps modeled on the recent visitor-friendly renovation of Bryant Park in New York City.

Other projects that could be implemented in coming months include musical and theatrical performances and a turf grass demonstration program.

Creating a First Amendment Park on the Mall—perhaps a simple landscaped area at the foot of Capitol Hill—is another idea. Similar to Speaker’s Corner at Hyde Park in London, it would reinforce the Mall’s core symbolism while offering individuals an inspiring symbolic place to exercise free speech.

In conclusion, the public has stated its concerns and they are real. We see today the effects of the barricades, lack of access, and disjointed amenities. You have given us a wonderful opportunity today to address these concerns and propose ways to improve in the short-term some of the immediate difficulties the public faces, and to sculpt a comprehensive and lasting memorial for all people—the Third Century Mall. Yes, there are challenges, but there are also prospects for greatness.

I am happy to expand on any of these ideas.

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