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The Monumental Core

Taking an Expansive View of the Mall

Group Envisions Additions With More Major Museums To Help Keep Area Vibrant

By SPENCER S. HSU
Washington Post Staff Writer

Is the Mall now complete? One group of Washington advocates doesn't think so, no matter what Congress and federal planners say.

At issue is the place that many Americans envision when they think of the nation's capital: the great green rectangle lined by museums and bounded by the Lincoln Memorial, U.S. Capitol, White House and Jefferson Memorial, with the Washington Monument in the middle.

When the National Museum of the American Indian opened in September near the Capitol, federal authorities announced that after decades of construction, the 725-acre space was full. "We consider the Mall a finished work of civic art," National Capital Planning Commission Chairman John V. Cogbill III said, echoing Congress, which imposed a moratorium in 2003 to prevent runaway growth of markers beyond those already approved. Recent additions include memorials for World War II, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Korean War.

But a group of interested citizens doesn't agree with Cogbill's assessment. In the tradition of the democracy the Mall symbolizes, they say it is time for federal custodians to think bigger.

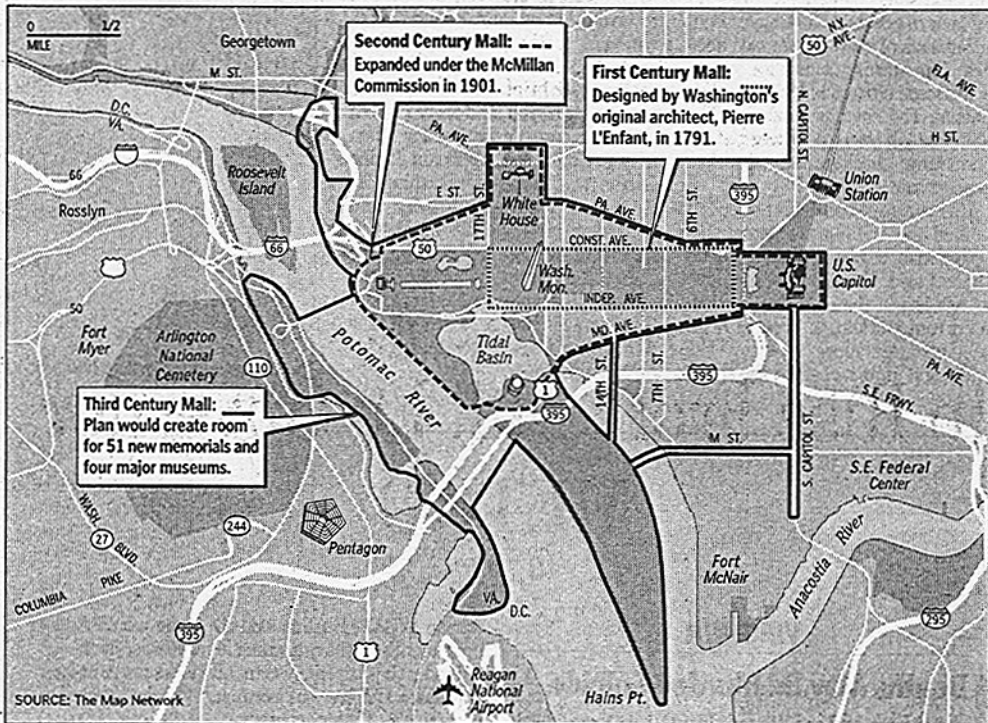
Hence the National Mall Third Century Initiative. The goal is to pick up where Washington's original architect, Pierre L'Enfant, left off in 1791, and to expand on the work of a 1901 commission led by Sen. James McMillan of Michigan. His panel of leading U.S. architects and sculptors extended the Mall west and south of the Washington Monument, selected a site for the Lincoln Memorial, established what became East and West Potomac parks and generally re-landscaped the ceremonial core of Washington and reclaimed land for waterfront parks, parkways and new memorials. Now, advocates say, it is time to enlarge by 50 percent and redefine America's front yard once again — for a new century — as the McMillan Commission did in its day.

No, they don't mean widening or lengthening the present space. Adding to it is what they have in mind. "The question is: Is the Mall to be now declared a monument to America as was finally achieved in the 20th century ... or is the Mall an ever-evolving, open, public space dedicated to the expression of democracy?" said Judy Scott Feldman, chairman of the National Coalition to Save Our Mall.

In nearly 50 briefings for members of Congress, federal regulators, National Park Service personnel and editorial writers, Feldman's group has laid out a plan that would expand the Mall from the Lincoln Memorial three miles along the waterfront to East Potomac Park's Hains Point; include a spur from the Capitol down South Capitol Street; and add bridges to link pedestrian, bicycle and some vehicular traffic among the sites

The New Mall?

A citizens group is supporting the National Mall Third Century Initiative, which would enlarge by 50 percent the area known as the Mall.



and even to a brief span of Virginia's Potomac River bank.

Supporters say the plan would create room for 51 memorial projects and four major museums. Existing plans project room for 17 projects but no ideal space for a large museum, they say. To spread the message, Feldman's coalition has printed a small, green pocket map and pamphlet titled "The National Mall, Stage for Our Democracy" available at the National Building Museum and at Congress's First Call service office in the basement of the Longworth House Office Building.

Feldman argues that increasing the Mall's size would boost its historical and cultural meaning as well and keep it from becoming a static, increasingly security-conscious museum piece, like, say, Colonial Williamsburg. "If it is a completed work of art, then all of the fencing off we've been doing and all the security that's going to protect the monuments are going to maintain the Mall just like the Roman ruins are retained in Italy in monument form," Feldman said. "It will become dead as a living, public space. It will become a historical artifact."

The group's efforts have stirred discussion. At a spring hearing of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources subcommittee on national parks,

Chairman Craig Thomas (R-Wyo.) remarked on the Mall's special meaning and called for a "concerted planning effort" for the 21st century.

But in a written statement last week, Thomas said, "It's a little early to say whether there will be a need for another McMillan-style commission."

Thomas said that he is "working closely" with the Park Service and that "any potential commission should incorporate a park service plan."

John Parsons, an associate director for the Park Service's National Capital Region, said managers are getting ready to draft a broad management plan next spring. "This is essentially responding to what the coalition is saying," Parsons said.

He added that a McMillan-style commission is unnecessary because the National Capital Planning Commission has responsibility for planning federal Washington.

Feldman is unconvinced. Existing plans to scatter memorials across the city will isolate and dilute the relevance of the Mall, she said.

"Senator Thomas and the agencies still see the Mall as real estate. They don't accept it as the people's place and the stage for our democracy," Feldman said. "If they did, they would realize that the theme-park model can't work."

BY MARY KATE CANNISTRA — THE WASHINGTON POST