
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
MASTER PLAN REVIEW**

Property Address:	2501 First Street, NW	X	Agenda
Landmark/District:	McMillan Park Reservoir		Consent Calendar
HPA Numbers:	13-208 (raze)	X	Permit
	13-214 (concept, rehabilitation of site)	X	Alteration
Meeting Date:	March 28, 2013		New Construction
Staff Reviewer:	Steve Callcott	X	Demolition

The District of Columbia Water and Sewer Authority (DC Water) seeks review of a raze application for two below-grade sand filtration cells at the McMillan Sand Filtration Plant, a component of the larger McMillan Park Reservoir. The raze is being sought as part of a proposal to construct a storm water and sewer overflow tunnel within First Street, a central component of a Mayoral initiative to address surface flooding and sewer backups in the Bloomingdale and LeDroit Park neighborhoods. The applicant has concurrently submitted a concept application and seeks the Board’s comments on three options for how the site could be rehabilitated upon completion of the project.

DC Water’s proposal is separate from, but is being coordinated with, the master planning efforts being undertaken by the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Economic Development (DMPED) and the Vision McMillan Partners (VMP). The proposal has resulted in changes to the development master plan which will be presented separately to the Board and the Mayor’s Agent.

Property History and Description

McMillan Park Reservoir, constructed between 1902 and 1905, was the city’s first large-scale water filtration facility. Typical of the best works of the City Beautiful era, it represents an artful integration of Beaux-Arts planning and architectural principles with advanced engineering and technology. The complex was conceived as part of the Senate Park Commission’s monumental plan for Washington, in which the utilitarian complex was aesthetically integrated into the McMillan Plan’s proposal for a ring of interconnected parks and open spaces that would extend across the city from Rock Creek Park to Fort Dupont.

The McMillan Reservoir complex is comprised of two parcels. The 68 acre reservoir site, located west of 1st Street, NW, remains in federal ownership and operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The sand filtration site, which was conveyed to the District in 1987, is located east of 1st Street, bounded by North Capitol on the east, Michigan Avenue on the north, and Channing Street on the south. This parcel, just under 25 acres, consists of 20 below-grade, groin-vaulted concrete cells that were filled with sand to filter water (the complex has a total of 29 filter beds, nine of which remain on the Army Corps property). Above grade, the site is organized into thirds by two east-west service courts that contain the

distinctive cylindrical concrete sand storage bins, brick regulator houses capped by red tile roofs, and concrete sand washing structures.

The site was designed by Allen Hazen, Supervising Engineer, with construction overseen by A.M. Miller, the head of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. was responsible for the development of the McMillan Plan's landscape elements, including the proposed ring of open green spaces surrounding the city, of which the reservoir was a part. Several years after the facility was constructed, Olmsted transformed the utilitarian filtration beds into spaces defined by allees of trees and the basin into a lake encircled by a winding drive and walking paths. In 1906, soon after completion, the site was named in honor of Senator James McMillan, the advocate of the Senate Park Commission's plan who died during its construction.

The 92 acre site was listed as a landmark in the DC Inventory in 1991, and listed on the National Register of Historic Places as an historic district on February 20, 2013.

Proposal

The project seeks to demolish the two sand filtration cells at the southwest corner of the parcel (filter beds 25 and 26) to create a staging and boring area for the construction of a below-grade vertical entrance shaft to a storm water and sewer tunnel that will run under First Street. The tunnel and its associated diversion chambers would provide a holding facility for up to six million gallons of storm and waste water; the water could then be released slowly following a storm so as to not flood the surrounding Bloomingdale and LeDroit Park neighborhoods. The project also calls for a concrete service road to the site for construction and regular servicing and clean-out of the vertical entrance shaft.

DC Water has also developed three conceptual schemes for how the project could be constructed and accessed:

Option A, which is the applicant's preferred option, calls for the service road to be accessed from First Street through a new curb cut south of the southern service court. Once the two filter beds were demolished, the site would be lowered from its existing elevation (170') by approximately 10-12 feet such that the top of the tunnel entrance would be constructed at an elevation of 159' and sloped slightly at the edges to meet the surrounding street elevations of between 155'-159'.

Option B calls for the service road to be accessed from First Street as in Option A, but would recreate the site's existing topography at the finished elevation at 170'. The tunnel entrance would shift slightly to the east to create sufficient distance and an acceptable slope for the access road to traverse the change in grade. The applicants have calculated that backfilling the site with soil will require approximately 50,000 cubic yards of soil, which would add expense to the project and additional disruption to the surrounding neighborhood.

Option C calls for the access road to be established through the south service court (which has been proposed to be converted to a road in the development master plan), eliminating the

need for a separate curb cut from First Street. The road would access the tunnel entrance through one of the existing ramps through the service court wall; the opening within the wall would need to be widened. The topography would be returned to the existing 170' elevation as in Option B.

Regardless of the options, the finished condition of the shaft would be an at-grade concrete pad with a flush access hatch; there would be no above-grade building or structure. While the site above and around the shaft could not be built upon and regular access would need to be maintained, DC Water has stated that the site can be open to public access and does not require securing or fencing. All of the options may require some temporary stabilization of the service court wall during demolition.

Review by the HPRB and Mayor's Agent

In matters where the Board finds demolition to be inconsistent with the purposes of the preservation act, such as those involving demolition of contributing buildings or important character-defining features of landmarks, the Board provides its recommendations to the Mayor's Agent for Historic Preservation.¹ As stated in a February 25, 2013 letter to the State Historic Preservation Officer requesting a hearing by the Mayor's Agent, the applicants will be arguing that the demolition is necessary for construction of the First Street tunnel as a project of special merit. A project of special merit is defined in the preservation law as "a plan or building having significant community benefits to the District of Columbia or the community by virtue of exemplary architecture, specific features of land planning, or social or other benefits having a high priority for community services."

Evaluation

The DC Inventory and National Register nominations identify the filtration beds as significant and contributing features of the landmark, calling them the "heart" of a sand filtration water treatment plan. Demolition of such important contributing features is not consistent with the purposes of the preservation act as it pertains to the treatment of landmarks, which are:

- (A) To retain and enhance historic landmarks in the District of Columbia and to encourage their adaptation for current use; and
- (B) To encourage the restoration of historic landmarks.²

While the Mayor's Agent will ultimately make the determination as to whether the project constitutes one of special merit, it is certainly credible that a project that will alleviate the regular flooding of two densely-developed urban neighborhoods will be found to provide "significant community benefits" and a "high priority for community services." If the Mayor's Agent does make such a finding, the Board's comments on the proposed finished

¹ The Mayor's Agent hearing has been scheduled for Friday, April 5, 2013 at 1:30 PM at the Office of Planning, 1100 4th Street, SW, Room 650.

² While recently listed in the National Register as an historic district, McMillan Park Reservoir was designated by the HPRB and is listed in the DC Inventory as a landmark.

treatment of the site are particularly important to ensure that the physical and visual loss of character to the landmark are minimized and mitigated to the greatest extent possible.

In evaluating the proposed options for rehabilitation of the site, Option C is certainly the best at mitigating the loss of physical fabric by recreating the site's original outward visual appearance. In its review of the development master plan last year, the Board identified the site's flat topographical plateau and perimeter condition as particularly important features that should be retained or strongly referenced in any reuse of the property. The restored topography as presented in Option C would allow eventual recreation of the corner stairs that provided access to the Olmsted perimeter walk, and preserve the best location for views from the site to the monumental core of the city. While resulting in some alteration to the south service court wall for the expanded ramp opening, this would have far less impact on the character of the site than would be created by a new separate service road off First Street.

Conversely, Option A would dramatically change the character of the site by eliminating the raised topography at the southwestern corner of the site and result in a new curb cut and vehicular drive; it would have the effect of visually severing the site from the remainder of the property. While Option B is a less drastic alteration to the site's visual character, its proposed drive access from First Street would result in a significant break in the perimeter condition that is far less preferable to the vehicular access plan in Option C.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board:

- *Find the proposed demolition to be inconsistent with the purposes of the preservation act, as it will result in the demolition of important character-defining features of the McMillan Park Reservoir landmark;*
- *Recommend to the Mayor's Agent that if the project is determined to be a project of special merit, that Option C proposed by the applicant would result in the best possible mitigation of the loss of the filtration cells, as it would result in the recreation of the site's distinctive original topography and would take advantage of the existing south service court to provide access to the site.*