



NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION *for*
OLMSTED
PARKS

April 3, 2012

Gretchen Pfaehler, Chair
Historic Preservation Review Board
1100 4th Street, SW Suite E650
Washington, DC 20024

**Re: Testimony before the District of Columbia Historic Preservation Review Board –
McMillan Park and Sand Filtration Site**

Dear Chair Pfaehler and members of the Historic Preservation Review Board,

The National Association for Olmsted Parks appreciates the opportunity to express our concerns regarding the proposed master plan and design guidelines for development of the nationally significant McMillan Park and Sand Filtration Site that are being considered during the Historic Preservation Review Board's hearing, scheduled for April 4, 2013.

We urge you to reject the proposed plans which do not take into account the historic significance of the site. The proposed plans would destroy much of the site's unique historic fabric, including most of the below-ground infrastructure that is crucial to understanding the scale and operation of the slow sand filtration plant. The proposed development plans would also destroy the character-defining visual and spatial relationships that are central to the original design intent for the site.

The "Historic Preservation Report for the Proposed Redevelopment of the McMillan Slow Sand Filtration Plant" (prepared by EHT Tracerics, Inc. for Vision McMillan Partners, July 28, 2010) comprehensively and conclusively makes the case for the historic significance of the McMillan Reservoir, based on the HPRB's McMillan Park Reservoir Historic Landmark designation. The Report also argues for the historic significance of the 25-acre McMillan Park Site as a distinct component of the McMillan Park Reservoir Historic Landmark, based on the Landmark designation as well as on EHT Tracerics' own research findings.

Based on the 2010 Historic Preservation Report (quoted below), and on the U.S. Department of the Interior's National Register Criteria for Evaluation, for which the property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, the McMillan Park site is historically significant, among other criteria, because of its:

A. Association with the history of water purification. It was the first water treatment facility in the city of Washington, and its operation resulted in the elimination of typhoid epidemics and reduced incidence of other diseases. The McMillan Site contains a majority of the infrastructure

associated with the filtration capabilities of the slow sand filtration plant, and is crucial to understanding the operation and scale of the slow sand filtration plant as a facility for water purification for the entire city of Washington.

B. Association with Senator James McMillan. In 1906, the reservoir and sand filtration complex were named “McMillan Park” in honor of Senator James McMillan. McMillan was the driving force in the creation and implementation of the 1901 Senate Park Committee report which established a comprehensive plan based on L’Enfant’s 1791 plan for the city of Washington. Now widely known as “The McMillan Plan,” the 1901 Senate Park Commission plan for Washington, D.C. ranks among the most significant urban plans in American history. It called for the completion of the Mall, the articulation of ceremonial boulevards throughout the city, the design of a governmental office complex (today’s Federal Triangle), the establishment of a comprehensive park and recreation system, and the overall beautification of the city. The designation of the reservoir and sand filtration site as a publicly accessible park was a testament to McMillan’s efforts to beautify the nation’s capital by enhancing its system of public open spaces at the turn of the century.

C. Association with Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. (1870-1957). In 1906, the Army Corps of Engineers commissioned Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., a member of the 1901 McMillan Commission, as the landscape architect for the design of McMillan Park. The son of renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Olmsted Jr. was himself one of the preeminent landscape architects in the United States, and a formative figure in American city, suburban and regional planning. He not only helped develop the McMillan Plan but was instrumental in guiding its execution by serving—between 1910 and 1932—on the two federal oversight bodies for planning Washington: the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts and the National Capital Park Planning Commission. As adviser or designer, Olmsted Jr. worked on many prominent Washington landmarks, including the White House grounds, Federal Triangle, Jefferson Memorial, Roosevelt Island, Rock Creek Park and Parkway, and the National Cathedral grounds.

In addition, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. is well known for his extensive work in planning state and regional park systems across the country; for his establishment of the first formal training program in landscape architecture at Harvard University in 1900; and for writing the key language in the 1916 bill that established the National Park Service. For thirty years he advised the National Park Service on issues of management and the conservation of water and scenic resources nationwide.

For more than 50 years Olmsted Jr. was a preeminent practitioner and spokesman for landscape architecture and comprehensive planning. He was a founder of the American Society of Landscape Architects and was instrumental in organizing the American City Planning Institute which evolved into the American Planning Association.

The McMillan Park site was planned as a distinct component of the McMillan Reservoir. Olmsted’s design provided a unique function as a perimeter pedestrian park through which the public could stroll and visually experience the unusual landscape of the site’s open plains and structures.

D. Distinctive design and construction as a public works facility and public park. The McMillan Park Reservoir was a major element of the water system of the District of Columbia, and an urban American engineering resource of great historic, cultural, landscape, planning, engineering, and architectural significance. (see also the Landmark designation decision for McMillan Park Reservoir, August 21, 1991). It is an element of the McMillan Park System which envisioned a linkage of green open spaces from Rock Creek to Anacostia through the developing suburbs north of the Federal City.

The McMillan Park Reservoir is the result of the collaboration of major figures in the City Beautiful movement who later contributed to the aesthetic and architectural development of Washington. In the 19th and early 20th century, public utilities were often integrated into a city's built fabric and prominently displayed as evidence of urban progress and accomplishments of design and technology. The McMillan Park Reservoir stands as a prominent example of "public works" of that period. The landscape design by a prominent landscape architect as a means to enhance the utilitarian infrastructure of the District of Columbia's water system represents critical understanding of the importance of public works as a part of the City Beautiful Movement.

Thoughtful reuse of the McMillan Park site can provide its neighborhoods and the city of Washington with critically needed public open space and recreational opportunities, as well as create a nationally significant cultural destination that would benefit the entire city.

The National Association for Olmsted Parks asks that you reject the misguided master plan that will destroy the irreplaceable historic resources of this significant cultural site. We hope you will instead consider creative alternatives that are sympathetic to the unique resources of the McMillan Park site, and honor the legacy of Senator McMillan and the District's visionary 20th century planning.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Iris Gestram
Executive Director

cc: Friends of McMillan Park

¹The Trust for Public Land's recent Park Score study identified the area east of the McMillan site as a neighborhood with "high" park need.