

THE NORTHWEST CURRENT

Effort aims to connect residents with Mall

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A group that has been working to preserve the National Mall from overbuilding and neglect wants the District government — and local residents — to become more involved in the hallowed green space that runs through the heart of the city.

That's one of three "first steps" the National Coalition To Save Our Mall is proposing in a new report on "The Future of the National Mall." The other two are better visitor orientation and public education about the heritage and evolution of the Mall. The report will be discussed at a forum Dec. 9, when volunteer task forces will be formed.

The National Coalition To Save Our Mall, chaired by former American University professor Judy Scott Feldman, has been fighting for several years against the proliferation of monuments and museums on what was designed as an open green space. The group's initial nemesis — the controversial World War II Memorial — is now built, and barricades, bollards and underground visitor centers continue to pro-



Bill Petros/Current File Photo

Judy Scott Feldman, president of the National Coalition to Save Our Mall, took a group of supporters on a tour of the Washington Monument grounds in October 2002.

liferate.

But the group has also achieved some success: the shelving, at least for now, of a proposed security tunnel for visitors to enter the Washington Monument.

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And federal planners and most members of Congress agree that future monuments and museums should find sites outside the Mall.

Last winter, the coalition launched a National Mall Conservancy Initiative, to formulate a long-term vision for the Mall and help renew it as a vital public space.

The conservancy hosted several public forums and workshops over the past year, seeking advice from citizens, government officials and two pioneering conservancies that successfully revived Central Park in New York City and guided planning for the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in San Francisco.

The new report says that District residents generally "feel disconnected from the Mall, which functions more as a tourist destination than as a part of the total life of the city."

Thus, one major thrust will be to create a "base of involved, supportive citizens" as a local constituency for the Mall.

In one workshop, participants complained that local residents "don't go to the Mall very often. Many District residents don't feel connected; it isn't their Mall."

The Mall is actually not very visitor-friendly, either, according to the report. In summer, it is hot, dry and dusty, with the few shady places lacking benches. Restrooms are few and far between, especially when the museums are closed, and parking is the proverbial nightmare.

"It's not like Hains Point or Rock Creek, where we feel like we can fire up a grill," one workshop participant said.

According to Feldman, parking lots around the monuments are gradually being eliminated in the name of security.

"The Mall fails because it is not a welcoming place for human

beings," she said. "You can't just drop in. It's a giant public park essentially used by tour buses."

Some tentative steps to change that are already under way. Led by architect Kent Cooper, the conservancy is talking to local groups about ways to improve transportation, parking and even public restrooms when the museums are closed. He is also planning a Web site to let locals and tourists alike know what's going on at the Mall.

Feldman thinks the local government — particularly the mayor and the Office of Planning — should be involved as well.

The city does have jurisdiction over streets crossing the Mall, she noted, but officials are essentially "shut out, told to stay out of it."

Instead, Feldman said, she envisions an active role for the city "in enlivening the public space, creating programming for public use — schools, musical programs, theater — to make it come alive again."

Another suggestion involves the area south of the White House known as the Ellipse, now largely used as a parking area for government employees and site of the National Christmas Tree.

The new report suggests it might be designated as a "memorial to the presidency" and used for future presidential memorials, alleviating building pressures elsewhere on the Mall. And an underground garage at the Ellipse could provide parking for visitors and tourists.

Over the centuries, there have been many grand dreams for the National Mall. Pierre L'Enfant's 1791 plan included a 400-foot-wide, tree-lined "grand avenue" connecting the Capitol to the Washington Monument and White House. He envisioned the space as "a place of general resort" for public walks.

In 1901-02, the McMillan Plan extended the Mall west and south over the Potomac River's bed to create sites for the Lincoln and

Jefferson memorials, creating the current kite shape.

That plan also emphasized the Mall as a "civic and cultural center," an embodiment of American democracy where citizens could play, parade and protest. The Folklife Festival, Black Family Reunion and Fourth of July celebration are modern examples of what the planners envisioned.

But still, today, many visitors see the Mall as a collection of museums and monuments around a rather plain and inhospitable lawn, according to the report. And the green space keeps filling up, most notably of late with the World War II Memorial and National Museum of the American Indian.

There have been many attempts to slow the construction, the latest in 2003 when Congress passed a moratorium on further building, calling the Mall "a substantially completed work of civic art."

But that same act exempted the proposed Vietnam Memorial Visitor Center from the moratorium. Pressures from other groups to build on this prime real estate continue, and no one is sure whether the moratorium will hold.

Part of the problem, said the report, is that day-to-day management of the Mall is divided among many agencies, including the National Park Service, Smithsonian Institution, General Services Administration and Congress itself, none directly focusing on the "open space as a symbol of democracy."

Instead, parts of the Mall are filling up with war memorials, "moving the balance of meaning towards signifying war as the core purpose of our democracy," according to the report.

The conservancy will host a public forum to introduce the report and plan next steps on Dec. 9 from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. at the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University.