

Kennedy Center

Access Study



A cooperative effort of the Federal Highway Administration,
National Park Service, D.C. Department of Public Works,
and John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts

112 STAT. 204

PUBLIC LAW 105-178—JUNE 9, 1998

SEC. 1214. FEDERAL ACTIVITIES.

(a) ACCESS TO JOHN F. KENNEDY CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS.—

(1) STUDY.—The Secretary, in cooperation with the District of Columbia, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and the Department of the Interior and in consultation with other interested persons, shall conduct a study of methods to improve pedestrian and vehicular access to the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

(2) REPORT.—Not later than September 30, 1999, the Secretary shall transmit to the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure of the House of Representatives and the Committee on Environment and Public Works of the Senate a report containing the results of the study with an assessment of the impacts (including environmental, aesthetic, economic, and historical impacts) associated with the implementation of each of the methods examined under the study.

(3) AUTHORIZATION OF APPROPRIATIONS.—There is authorized to be appropriated out of the Highway Trust Fund (other than the Mass Transit Account) to carry out this subsection \$500,000 for fiscal year 1998.

(4) APPLICABILITY OF TITLE 23, UNITED STATES CODE.—Funds authorized by this subsection shall be available for obligation in the same manner as if such funds were apportioned under chapter 1 of title 23, United States Code; except that the Federal share of the cost of activities conducted using such funds shall be 100 percent and such funds shall remain available until expended.

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Introduction

The John F. Kennedy Center is a Congressionally designated national showcase for the performing arts and a living memorial to the late President. In its dual roles, the Center is a powerful attraction for visitors and residents alike, yet the building is removed from the capital city, isolated by natural and man-made barriers. Its surroundings impede the access of more than five million people who attend performances and visit the Center each year.

The Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) directed the Secretary of Transportation to undertake a comprehensive study of ways to improve access to the Center. During the past year, the Federal Highway Administration has worked in partnership with the Kennedy Center and other federal and local agencies to develop long-term multimodal transportation and land-use improvement options that would facilitate safe traffic flow to and from the Center, improve transit service, and make bicycling and walking around the Center safer, more pleasant, and more direct.

Integrating the Center with its surroundings—the riverfront, the Mall, Georgetown, and Foggy Bottom—is



The Kennedy Center is isolated from the surrounding city.



The Center's physical setting is inconsistent with its mission.



Improved multimodal linkages and an enhanced setting have been identified through the study.

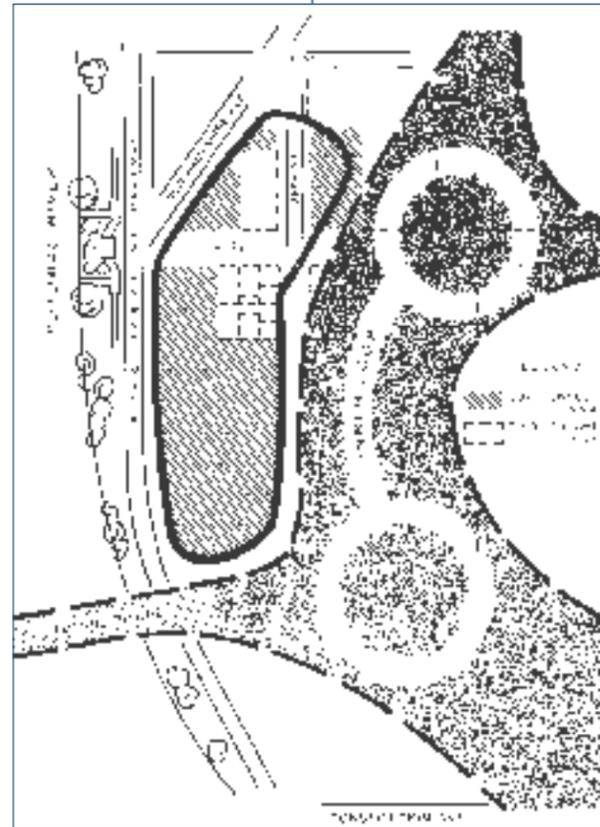
central to improving access. Reestablishing the street grid east of the Center is the best way to meet this goal. In addition, it would serve many other needs identified by this study—enhancing safety; improving bicycle and pedestrian connections; relieving congestion suffered by Center patrons before and after performances; and enhancing the Center's setting. The memorial, which symbolically speaks for America's artistic aspirations and leadership, would finally be connected to the city and the Potomac waterfront.

This report documents the study's findings and presents ways to overcome the physical barriers isolating the Center. The plan includes low-cost traffic safety improvements and large-scale infrastructure enhancements. These improvements, applied as a package, would strengthen the Center's vitality and vibrancy in the 21st Century.

Historical Background

Development of a National Cultural Center began in earnest in 1958 when President Eisenhower signed bipartisan legislation for its creation. Locating a site large enough to accommodate the Center's functions and suit its national character was particularly challenging. This single issue created so much controversy that the project nearly died on several occasions. Almost half a century later, overcoming the site's shortcomings and providing an appropriate setting remain national concerns.

During the early stages of the Center's development, several locations were considered, including the National Mall (specifically, where the National Air and Space Museum is located), the Southwest Redevelopment Area (near L'Enfant Plaza), along Pennsylvania Avenue, the Pension Building, and in Foggy Bottom along the Potomac River. All of the sites were problematic, leading Roger Stevens, then Chairman of the Center's Board of Trustees to lament, "I have yet to be asked to consider a specific site which is both suitable and available."



This late 1950's view shows that the Center's site was severely constrained by the imposition of the Potomac Freeway and its connections to the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Bridge.



The Center's initial design was far more elaborate than the building that was eventually constructed. It had strong ties to the riverfront and other surroundings.



The original plan included a strong visual tie with the City and a building seamlessly integrated into its environment.

During the same period, the Army Corps of Engineers was seeking an alignment for a bridge (now the Interstate 66-Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Bridge) to link Virginia with a new complex of roads in the District (an ill-fated Inner Loop Freeway). Backers of the cultural center helped to secure the bridge's placement. In return, the Corps facilitated the assembling of land in Foggy Bottom. This proved to be a Faustian bargain, as the freeway imposed serious constraints on the site.

The Center's initial design was for a grand curvilinear building whose steps would flow to the Potomac River. An idyllic park-like setting would seamlessly integrate the building and its paths, drives, and plantings into the surrounding landscape. A strong visual connection to the City would augment its ties to the building's northeast. The Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway would serve as the Center's main access road and was to skirt the building's eastern (city) side.

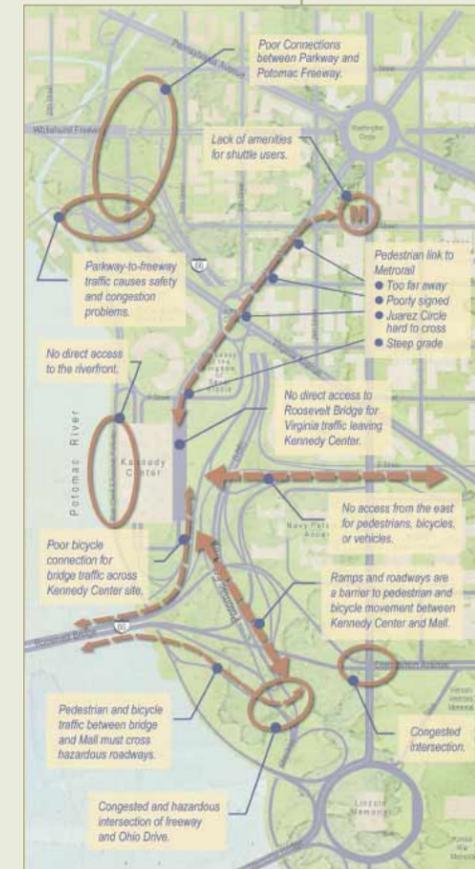
Current Conditions

Despite the design's appeal, its cost far exceeded the amount of private funds that could be raised for development. The building was subsequently redrawn to its current configuration. The riverfront connection was lost. The grand entrance was replaced by a stub driveway from New Hampshire Avenue and the park-like setting was given up to the bulk of the structure.

The configuration of the Potomac Freeway created the largest barrier of all. Its main line and ramp connections to the Roosevelt Bridge cut the Center off from areas to the south and east—i.e., the Mall, E Street, and much of Foggy Bottom. The nation's symbol of artistic vibrance was separated from the residents, workers, and visitors it was meant to serve. L'Enfant's vision for integrating the symbolic capital with the working city—and linking the Nation's most important buildings with its finest avenues—was scuttled. As one critic noted, "the physical manifestation of our culture is a traffic island between highways and freeways which is virtually inaccessible on foot."



The scaled back design lost connections to the Center's surroundings and set it apart from the rest of the City.



Numerous conditions contribute to the Center's isolation.

Visitors and patrons suffer from the compromises of the past in several ways.

- There is no direct path from the Center to the east or southeastward to the National Mall, and there are inadequate connections from the riverfront to the Center. In the absence of clear walkways, pedestrians improvise a hazardous footpath and sprint across the freeway. Others dash across the parkway near a blind corner on the Center's south side. The bicycle connection to the Custis/I-66 trail crosses an Interstate off-ramp. Dangerously narrow pedestrian and bicycle portals exist on the east side of the parkway under the Roosevelt Bridge.
- Performances begin near the end of Washington's evening rush hour. Vehicular traffic is confounded by high levels of congestion on the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway and various bridge ramps near performance times. In addition, there are high accident rates at the foot of the Roosevelt Bridge and at the intersection of Virginia Avenue, 27th Street, and the parkway.
- Nearly 200,000 vehicles a day use the complex of ramps and roadways adjacent to the Center. Improvements must ensure that these volumes are served and that traffic is not backed up onto the Roosevelt Bridge or diverted onto neighborhood streets.
- The Foggy Bottom metro station is too far away for most patrons to walk comfortably to the Center. Visitors unfamiliar with the area are not likely to find the Center since it is not visible from the station and there are no directional signs. The Kennedy Center Show Shuttle addresses some of these concerns but must use residential streets for its route.

Improvements

Proposed improvements will make getting to and from the Center safer and easier while dramatically improving the West End's cityscape. The initial cost estimate for all improvements is \$269 million. Estimates are tabulated on page 17. Major elements of the overall improvement package, identified during the course of the study, are outlined on the following pages. No funding has been secured nor have funding plans been developed.

- Kennedy Center Plaza:** Central to the proposed design is a plaza, which set atop a deck over the Potomac Freeway would provide a new public space and stately approach to the Center from the east. E and 25th Streets would connect to the plaza, thus reestablishing the local street grid. The freeway and ramps immediately east of the Kennedy Center would be modified to accommodate through traffic beneath the plaza. The plaza, using freeway air rights, would contain a large public square and two potential building sites¹ whose use would be determined with extensive public input over the next several years. This will create a rare opportunity to define new civic space in the Monumental Core.



A deck, connections to 23rd Street, underground parking, landscaping, and non-vehicular access improvements are included in the plaza's cost.



A grand staircase, from the terrace to the riverfront promenade, would provide direct access to the waterfront and address the Center's ambivalent relationship to the river.

- Riverfront Access:** A grand open stairway (with elevators for the handicapped) would link the Kennedy Center terrace to the riverfront promenade, where a floating dock could serve river boats. This would properly present the Center to the waterfront and reconcile the Center's ambivalent relationship to the river. The open design would preserve views to the river from the parkway. These changes would facilitate pedestrian, bicycle, and river access and restore an important element of the building's original design.
- E Street Approach:** E Street would be modified at its western terminus to link the Center with President's Park and the core of the City.



E Street would be extended from the plaza to 23rd Street. An eastbound lane would be added from 23rd Street to Virginia Avenue.

- Through traffic would continue to use the E Street expressway below the plaza, while local traffic would use an improved surface-level street connected to the plaza.
- Traffic and Safety North of the Kennedy Center:** New connections would be built between the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway and the Potomac Freeway in the vicinity of K Street. This would improve the freeway's directness and convenience, diverting traffic from the parkway to the freeway. Reduced through traffic on the parkway would improve the riverfront promenade for pedestrians and

1. The plaza deck would be structurally independent from any buildings. If building did not occur within the plaza, an additional 100,000 square feet of deck would be required within the footprint of the building sites, adding \$36 million to project costs.

cyclists. The improvements would also relieve congestion and address safety hazards at the Virginia Avenue, Rock Creek Parkway, and 27th Street intersections.

• **Traffic and Safety South of the Kennedy Center:**

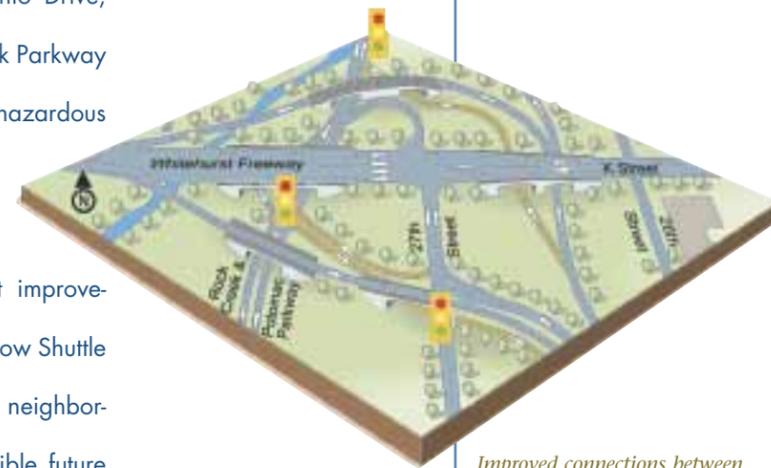
The complex intersection of Ohio Drive, with the Potomac Freeway and Rock Creek Parkway would be grade separated to relieve hazardous conditions and congestion.

• **Transit Improvements:**

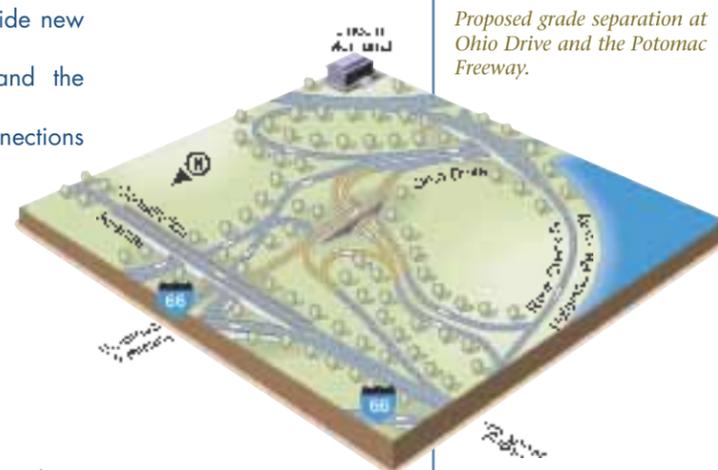
The E Street improvements would allow the Kennedy Center Show Shuttle to travel a direct route, thereby avoiding neighborhood streets. Alignment options for possible future light rail service, which could provide direct access to the Center, would be preserved.

• **Pedestrian and Bicycle Improvements:**

The plaza and connecting facilities would provide new linkages between the Kennedy Center and the surrounding community. Safe bicycle connections



Improved connections between the Potomac Freeway and Rock Creek Parkway.



Proposed grade separation at Ohio Drive and the Potomac Freeway.



The central plaza would vastly improve pedestrian and bicycle connections through the area.



Shown with the plaza deck removed, parking and direct connections to westbound Interstate 66 would be provided beneath the plaza.

would also be provided to the Custis/I-66 trail across the Roosevelt Bridge.

• **Signing Improvements:** Effective directional signs for through and local pedestrian, bicycle, and vehicular traffic would be installed.

• **Parking Improvements:** The area below the plaza would provide at least 500 new parking spaces. This parking would meet the needs of plaza development, ensuring that traffic generated by the site could be accommodated without intruding upon the scarce parking supply in the surrounding neighborhood. It could also serve the Kennedy Center's overflow parking needs.

These proposed improvements have been coordinated with, and are consistent with, the garage expansion and related site improvements that are part of the Center's comprehensive building renovation plan. Renovation projects have already been funded and are scheduled for completion in 2002.

Development Economics

Development of the plaza provides the opportunity to create nearly eleven acres of new space in the District's Monumental Core. Enhancing the Center's setting with a lively and attractive plaza would create a legacy that transcends the more fundamental access improvements underlying its development. Considering the plaza's proximity to the Kennedy Center, it would be possible to develop two small buildings, while preserving sight lines to and from the main building and maintaining the Center's predominance in the landscape. Preliminary massing and configuration studies suggest that the two buildings could produce approximately 400,000 square feet of gross building area.



A development economic analysis was carried out to examine the maximum economic gain that could be derived from leasing the air rights associated with the plaza. It showed that an aggressive mix of office, retail, and hotel uses have the potential to generate between \$19 and \$25 million in land value. This value could be recaptured through a long-term lease. Over its entire term, the lease of air rights could recoup seven to nine percent of the plaza's construction cost.

The analysis did not evaluate the appropriateness of such uses, considering the plaza's proximity to a presidential memorial. Rather, it was intended to establish a baseline upon which to compare the economics of potential uses. Various proposals arose during the course of study, such as a National Music Conservatory and administrative, rehearsal, and related programming space for the Kennedy Center. While these uses would not generate revenues equal to a commercially-intensive mix, the potential clearly exists for either public or private development within the plaza.

Decisions about building uses or architectural designs were beyond the scope of this study. Agreements on uses would have to be reached during project planning and environmental reviews, which are discussed in the next section. Competitions would also be held to determine the design of the plaza and buildings.

Implementation

If the concepts presented by this study are pursued, three steps will be necessary to implement them: (1) planning, environmental review, and design approval; (2) funding, construction, and plaza development; and (3) ongoing operations and maintenance. The estimated time frame for implementation is ten to fifteen years. A brief overview of each stage is provided below.

Step I - Project planning and environmental review. This phase, which would lead to concept and design approvals, would focus on project planning, environmental review, preliminary design, and the refinement of cost estimates. These activities could be undertaken through the continuing cooperative efforts of the Kennedy Center, the National Park Service, the D.C. Department of Public Works and the Federal Highway Administration.

It will be important during this phase of study to decide upon the type of development to occur within the plaza. Determining appropriate building uses in such close proximity to this living presidential memorial is an important public policy decision that will shape the project's implementation. Once environmental, project, and design approvals have been obtained, a formal



decision must be made to proceed with the development of a funding plan and the construction of improvements. This phase could be expected to last three to four years.

Step II - Air rights leasing, site development, funding, design, engineering, construction, leasing and initial maintenance.

Each of the four operating agencies has a stake in the concepts contained in this report. Development of the plaza should proceed only through their cooperative efforts and oversight. The determination of a lead agency must be reached, both for plaza construction and building development.

Plaza construction may be led by a public agency, regardless of how the buildings are developed. If plaza buildings are to be developed as an extension of the Kennedy Center in keeping with its designation as a living memorial, the Kennedy Center or the General Services Administration (GSA) might be the logical developer. GSA served as the agent for the original design and construction of the Kennedy Center. Both the National Park Service and FHWA utilize the services of GSA for development of real property.

Alternatively, if a private entity were to propose a development that consists of a set of private uses and an ownership plan that the coordinating agencies and other stakeholders consider appropriate to the unique Kennedy Center setting, then the private sector might play the lead development role.

Another possibility is to create a special-purpose organization charged exclusively with implementing the plaza improvements. This approach was taken with the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation and the Union Station Redevelopment Corporation. The main advantage of this approach is that a special purpose organization would have no other priorities that would compete for resources and attention. Its sole objective would be to see this project through to successful completion. Disadvantages include the time needed to create a new organization, to hire staff, and to commence operations. Furthermore, special purpose development agencies have had mixed success in the District in the past.

Step III - Ongoing operations. The third activity involves ongoing operations and maintenance of all infrastructure improvements and any new facilities, including buildings on the plaza. Responsibility for this activity will hinge upon whether the plaza is publicly or privately developed. Depending on which option is pursued, decisions will need to be made about building ownership terms. The most appropriate lead role for ongoing operations and maintenance of each project component, including potential buildings on the plaza, should be determined cooperatively by the coordinating agencies.

ESTIMATED TIMES TO CONSTRUCT IMPROVEMENTS

Phasing & Construction Staging	Estimated Duration (in months)	Capital Cost (in \$millions) ²
Phase I: North Sector Freeway-Parkway Connection	15	11
Phase 2: South Sector Ohio Drive-Freeway Grade Separation	15	9
Phase 3: Center Sector Plaza and Related Roadway Improvements	36	223
<u>Stage 1:</u> Shift freeway mainline and lower profile of northbound lanes (including mobilization)	10	41
<u>Stage 2:</u> Lower profile of southbound lanes and demolish E Street ramps	6	41
<u>Stage 3:</u> Construct new E Street and freeway ramps to Roosevelt Bridge	4	21
<u>Stage 4:</u> Construct plaza, connections to E and 25th Streets, and parking under plaza	10	63
<u>Stage 5:</u> Install landscaping, lighting, and special features	6	57
Phase 4: E Street Improvement (23rd Street to Virginia Avenue)	15	13
Phase Independent: Pedestrian Link Between the Kennedy Center and the Riverfront	16	13
Totals:	81	269

2. All costs in year 2000 dollars. Signing, parking, transit, bicycle and pedestrian improvements are included in the plaza cost estimates.

Conclusions

From its inception, the Kennedy Center has struggled to develop a physical setting befitting its mission. Compromises made in the early 1960's to accommodate the Inner Loop Freeway and lower building costs have created access and safety problems that affect the millions of visitors and patrons who enjoy the Center's rich offerings.

In the past year, an extensive effort has been undertaken to identify ways to overcome these problems. This report has identified and described potential improvements, estimated their costs, and identified an approach for implementing them, should they be pursued.

The concepts presented in this report have many advantages and their potential contribution to the landscape of the District's West End is compelling. Yet they must be considered in a realistic light. The plaza over the Potomac Freeway, first brought to attention in the National Capital Planning Commission's Legacy Plan (1997), is a costly proposition. Furthermore, care must be taken in its design to ensure that it does not become a magnet for urban woes in an empty and unattractive landscape. But the strong design review process and intense interest, demonstrated by stakeholders and the surrounding community during the past year, should ensure that design concerns are adequately addressed. The plaza is central to integrating the Center with its surroundings and creating safe pedestrian, bicycle, transit, and automobile ties.

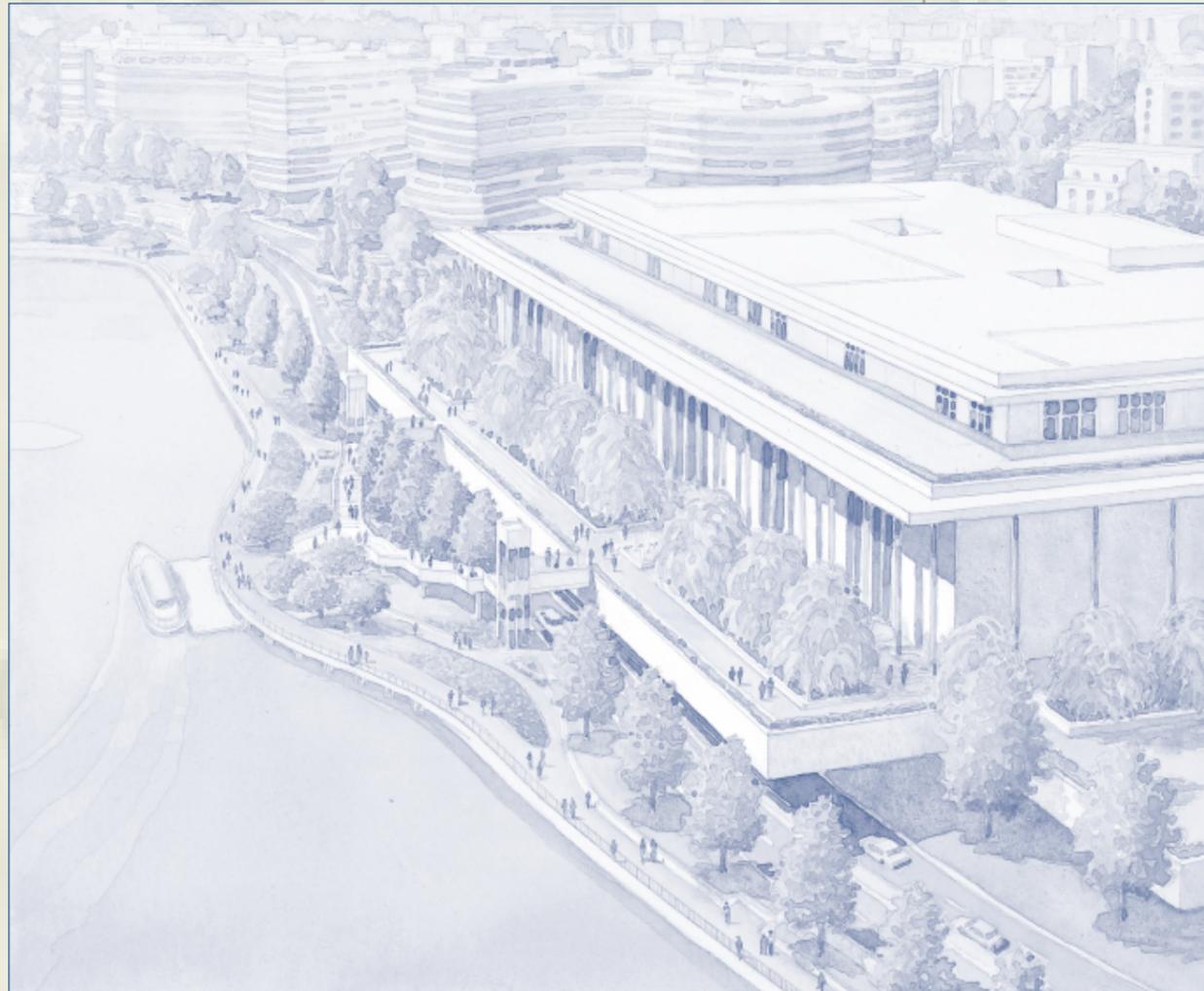


Additional traffic safety and congestion issues would be addressed by improvements to intersections with the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway north and south of the Center. For safety reasons, these less costly improvements merit implementation as soon as possible. They would markedly reduce congestion around the Center near performance times.

The center sector improvements would also vastly improve the safety and enjoyment of those who walk and bicycle in the vicinity. Steps from the Center's terrace to the riverfront would restore an important aspect of the building's original design and create a new entrance to the memorial. Sidewalks from the plaza would provide connections to the Mall and surrounding areas, which would redress unsafe makeshift paths across an Interstate highway.



The design concepts presented by this study offer a rare opportunity to create a vibrant space in the heart of the District's Monumental Core. With proper care and oversight, they can transform the area, eliminate many undesirable conditions, improve public safety, and enhance our nation's commitment to the performing arts.



The Kennedy Center Access Study represents the partnership of four organizations: the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the District of Columbia Department of Public Works, the National Park Service, and the Federal Highway Administration. Led by the Federal Highway Administration, a Project Steering Committee of senior staff drawn from each organization guided the study.

In addition to guidance provided by the Steering Committee, the project team met with over 30 other organizations and agencies with interests in the future of the Kennedy Center and its surroundings. These stakeholders provided valuable insights into transportation, land use, urban design, historic, aesthetic, and environmental issues in the area as well as specific ideas for improving access and strengthening connections between the Center and the surrounding community. Four open houses were held at the Kennedy Center, where the public had an opportunity to talk with the project team and Steering Committee. Presentations were also made to local citizen groups. The public voiced considerable support and provided many useful insights that helped shape and evaluate possible improvements.

The project builds upon previous plans and studies for the Kennedy Center and surrounding area, with particular emphasis on the National Capital Planning Commission's Legacy Plan. The Legacy Plan includes a vision of how the Kennedy Center could be connected to the surrounding community. This vision has guided the access study's planning and analysis.

The study, started in March 1999, lasted approximately one year. A draft interim report was produced in September 1999. This report transmits the study's final findings. It describes improvement concepts that have emerged from a planning process in which many transportation, land use, and urban design ideas and proposals were analyzed and evaluated. Further information may be obtained from the Federal Highway Administration's Office of Environment and Planning. Further information may be obtained from the Federal Highway Administration's Office of Environment and Planning, 400 Seventh Street SW, Washington, DC 20590, telephone 202-366-0150.



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Federal Highway Administration

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