November 13, 2006

The Hon. Linda W. Cropp
Chair
District of Columbia City Council
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C.  20004

Dear Chair Cropp,

On behalf of the National Association for Olmsted Parks (NAOP), I am writing to express our concern over the proposed transfer of the historic 25-acre McMillan Reservoir Sand Filtration Site to the National Capital Revitalization Corporation for commercial development.

The creation of McMillan Park in 1905 represented significant 20th century advancement in the implementation of the Senate Park Commission’s plan, also known as the McMillan Plan of 1901-1902. This effort revived L’Enfant’s concept of the National Mall, re-validated Olmsted Sr.’s design for the U.S. Capitol Grounds, and called for an “Emerald Necklace” of parks, open space and recreation facilities encircling the city.

With commanding views of the U.S. Capitol and the Washington Monument, McMillan Park satisfied two critical needs: safe water and open space for passive and active recreation. The site combined a massive civic infrastructure project — the sand filtration complex — with a public park and by doing so distinguished the District of Columbia as a leader in the City Beautiful planning movement, which supported beautification and monumental grandeur in cities to create harmonious social conditions to improve the lives of the city’s poor.

The site’s design and construction was the collaboration of pre-eminent 20th century civil engineers, urban planners, artists and architects including Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. — the principal planner and sole landscape architect of this unusual and unique site. The architecturally striking masonry structures of the sand filtration site complex are an engineering wonder that are alone worthy of preservation and have educational and heritage tourism potential for residents and visitors.

The filtration complex provided clean, safe water to Washingtonians for eighty years and for more than half that time the site provided a significant amount of parkland and open space for passive and active recreation. In fact, Olmsted Jr. envisioned and designed a more ambitious active recreation program that was never realized but is still desperately needed in the neighborhood today.

Development of this site – rather than its preservation and rehabilitation – would result in the permanent loss of a significant public park space that was originally set aside by the McMillan Plan and other luminaries of early 20th century planning.
As an advocacy organization, NAOP is very interested in this issue. Established in 1980, NAOP is a coalition of design and preservation professionals, historic property and park managers, scholars, municipal officials, citizen activists and representatives of numerous Olmsted organizations around the United States and Canada. Its primary concern is the legacy of work designed and inspired by Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. and his firm that continued to practice landscape architecture for almost a century through the involvement of his sons John Charles Olmsted and Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. NAOP advances the use of Olmstedian design principles and advocates for the protection of irreplaceable historic parks and landscapes that revitalize communities and enrich people’s lives.

We strongly believe that the District of Columbia should preserve this historic landscape and make it available to current and future generations of residents and visitors alike.

We ask that the District of Columbia:

- Recognize that the highest and best use of this nationally significant site is as a public park and potential educational/cultural facility to serve the needs and interests of the surrounding community and visitors.
- Reaffirm the vision of the Senate Park Commission’s plan.
- Reconsider the decision for commercial development, and instead, pass legislative protection for the site insisting that all measures afforded under Section 106 of the Historic Preservation Act and the transfer of title from the federal government to the District in 1987 are upheld.
- Preserve the historic masonry structures of the sand filtration complex.
- Rehabilitate the historic landscape design and restore the McMillan Fountain that once graced the park.
- Fully realize the potential for active recreation opportunities as originally envisioned by Olmsted.

We urge you to reconsider your plans to develop McMillan Reservoir Sand Filtration Site.

Sincerely,

Catherine Nagel
Executive Director

cc: The Hon. Mayor Anthony A. Williams
City Council Members
Mr. Stanley Jackson, Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development
Ms. Ellen McCarthy, Interim Director of the Office of Planning