March 21, 2012

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

Dear Chair Brown,

On behalf of the National Association for Olmsted Parks (NAOP), I am writing to express our concern about plans for development of the historic 25-acre McMillan Reservoir Park.

The creation of McMillan Reservoir 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. Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., a 20th-century landscape architect, environmental planner and seminal figure in American city planning, was the main force in the McMillan Commission’s planning and implementation of parks in the District of Columbia. The McMillan Commission’s effort sparked a renaissance of Washington, D.C., reviving L’Enfant’s concept of the National Mall, reviving Frederick Law Olmsted Sr.’s design for the U.S. Capitol Grounds, and calling for an “Emerald Necklace” of parks, open space and recreation facilities encircling the city.

The McMillan Plan proposed that the reservoir “be made an important supplement to the park system,” as indeed it was, serving as part of an eastern complement to Rock Creek Park on the west side of the city.

The McMillan Sand Filtration Reservoir Park was a resourceful solution to two major civic needs: clean and safe drinking water and a recreational park. During this era in the late 19th and early 20th century when municipalities sought to reduce the prevalence of infectious typhoid fever, a number of reservoirs and treatment facilities were created. The McMillan Reservoir was not only the largest slow sand filtration plant in the country, but almost certainly the only one co-designed as a park.

The District of Columbia has an outstanding opportunity to take advantage of this unique site by promoting it as a recreation and heritage tourism destination.

Central Park in New York and Cal Anderson Park in Seattle are two well-known landscapes designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. and the Olmsted Brothers, respectively, where reservoirs and parks were combined.

Shortly after the creation of McMillan Reservoir Park, the Denver Water Administration built the Kassler Filtration Plant, the first slow sand filtration plant...
west of the Mississippi. In 1985, it ceased operations and was turned into the Kassler Education Center, with many of the plant’s historical structures preserved. The Thorne Ecological Institute, a science and nature education organization serving children and adults operates at the Kassler Education Center.

McMillan Reservoir Park presents an equally worthy opportunity for recreation, education and heritage tourism for these reasons:
- It is an integral part of the McMillan Plan of Washington and the City Beautiful movement.
- It is a park designed by the founding firm of landscape architecture in the U.S.
- It was designated as a memorial park to Senator McMillan, the Chair of the Park Improvement Commission.
- It is a District of Columbia Historic District and is also eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.
- It is an outstanding example of water treatment engineering, named an American Water Landmark by the American Water Works Association.
- 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 enjoyment and recreation.

We have the opportunity to revive the site for the 21st century, taking a cue from the thinkers behind the McMillan Plan, who were not only visionary but practical, integrating infrastructure with beautification for the residents of and visitors to Washington:

Washington is growing very rapidly... its parks, like its public buildings, are not to be considered merely in reference to its resident population, but in relation to the millions of citizens from far and near who come to Washington expecting... not merely what is considered ‘good enough,’ but the very best that is to be had.1

The site’s design and construction was the product of a historic collaboration of leading 20th century civil engineers, urban planners, artists and architects including Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., the principal planner and landscape architect of this unique site. Allen Hazen, the engineer of the filtration plant, worked on the Panama Canal and Chicago Exposition. Herbert Allen, the sculptor of the memorial fountain, also created bronze doors for the Library of Congress; some of his sculptures are held by the National Gallery of Art.

Capitalizing on its location on a topographic rise with views of the Capitol and the Washington Monument, Olmsted Jr. designed a series of plantings including rows of hawthorn trees and hedges, cork trees in the service courts, evergreens around the reservoir and ground cover plants on slopes and the filtration beds. Olmsted advised Allen Hazen on the aesthetic aspects of the siting of water works and spent a significant amount of time onsite supervising grading and planting.

Although Olmsted planned an active recreation program with gym, track, pool and fields, these were never built. However, for several decades, residents used the carriageways, walkways, played ball on the east and north ends of the property and rested and chatted on benches.

After the property was transferred from federal ownership to the District of Columbia, the Council designated it as park, recreation and open space, but later changed its designation to allow mixed-use

development. An unfortunate consequence of that decision was the city's removal of the remaining Olmsted landscape elements.

Development of this site and removal of the sand filtration structures—rather than preservation and rehabilitation—would result in the permanent loss of a significant public park space that was originally set aside by the McMillan Plan.

As an advocacy organization, NAOP is very interested in this issue. Established in 1980, the National Association for Olmsted Parks advances Olmsted principles and the legacy of irreplaceable parks and landscapes that revitalize communities and enrich people's lives. It is the only national organization solely dedicated to preserving the Olmsted legacy by providing the advocacy, research and outreach needed to protect, restore and maintain these exemplary parks and landscapes, particularly in urban areas.

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

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.
- Follow due process and insist 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.
- Fully realize the potential for active recreation opportunities as envisioned by Olmsted.

We urge you to carefully consider the District's development plans for McMillan Reservoir Park.

Sincerely,

Iris Gestram
Executive Director

cc: The Honorable Vincent Gray
Councilmember Tommy Wells
Harriet Tregoning, Director of Office of Planning
Catherine V. Buell, Chair, Historic Preservation Review Board
David Maloney, State Historic Preservation Officer
Steve Calcott, Senior Preservation Planner
Friends of McMillan Park
Rebecca Miller, Executive Director, D.C. Preservation League
George Clark, Chairman, Committee of 100 on the Federal City
Robert Nieweg, National Trust for Historic Preservation