

Committee of 100 on the Federal City

Testimony of Anne Sellin re B16-0902, the Transfer of McMillan Park Reservoir to NCRC

October 20, 2006

At its membership meeting October 18, 2006 I was delegated by unanimous vote to represent the Committee of 100 in opposing the transfer of the 26 acres of the McMillan sand filtration site from the City to the NCRC. In 1990 I prepared the Historic Designation of McMillan with a grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation which published a number of striking photographs of the site for an article in its magazine.

McMillan Reservoir Park is of great importance to the City, not just as a water purification site, which greatly improved the health of D.C. citizens, but as an imaginative combination of landscaped park, with promenades, sculpture, curving carriage drives, careful grading and the placement of trees planned and personally supervised by the pre eminent landscape architect of the time, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. The heirs of Senator McMillan personally financed the landscaping. In preparing the nomination I spoke to a number of people who grew up around the park, officially designated as a park by Taft in 1906. They described their ethnically diverse neighborhoods near the park and their delight in this rigidly segregated city in being able to enjoy its amenities regardless of race. Courting couples promenaded on the geometrically laid out avenues on the east site under a canopy of clipped trees, families on hot summer nights slept in the park to catch the summer breezes that blew over the escarpment, boys played ball games on the east portion where there were fewer man hole covers near Michigan Avenue. They laughed about sometimes falling through the center of a vault to the white sand beneath when a man hole cover had been left open by the corps of engineers. All this enjoyment ended during the World War II when the entire site was fenced off in order to protect the water supply.

McMillan is a key part of the McMillan Park system, devised in 1902 and assiduously carried out into the 1940s and in some cases later. This Washington park plan was the genesis of the City Beautiful Movement and inspired many other cities such as Chicago, San Francisco, and Manila to emulate it, all cities Daniel Burnham was commissioned to plan, after he had been one of the four designing members of the McMillan Commission along with Frederick Law Olmsted Jr, Charles McKim and Augustus St. Gaudens. Outside the mall, the brilliance of the plan was to connect private and open green spaces in an "emerald necklace" through the rapidly growing city. Hence in this area of the city a string of school playgrounds from the west along the escarpment would lead to the campus of Howard University which would knit with the newly formed McMillan Park Reservoir linked the adjacent Old Soldiers' Home from which its land had been appropriated The linkage would

then be to the Trinity College campus, the Lincoln Cemetery and Catholic University. The Civil War Forts would form an outer circle of green space. The plan was superb but over the years after World War II so many large public open spaces have become closed or developed in this area, the neighborhoods have suffered a shocking loss of park land. They have no lovely squares such as those on Capital Hill or along Massachusetts Avenue, NW. The Soldiers Home, long enjoyed by children who visited the animals there and had picnics with their families, has long been closed to the public. The Washington Hospital Center has eaten up 30 of its original acres and almost a third of its remaining land is now scheduled for intensive development. The federal portion of McMillan has given up acres over the years to Howard University for dormitories, the recently constructed Fire Alarm building along McMillan Drive and the escarpment view thoroughly debased by an ill kempt parking lot for Department of Public Works vehicles. Lincoln Cemetery sold off a number of acres for the construction of apartment buildings

McMillan is too important a piece of public land to transfer to the NCRC which is a development agency. McMillan Park Reservoir should be restored as a park for the enjoyment of citizens. Once it is built on, those 26 acres can never be reclaimed. The twenty sand towers are wonderful punctuations to the site, as are the Flemish bond regulator houses, which could be used as changing rooms, a police substation, places for concessionaires and/or equipment rooms. Other cities, ones with imagination dedicated to the enhancement of family life, have converted disused civil engineering projects into parks which are tour de forces. The October issue of National Geographic shows how Paris has transformed the top of an old city aqueduct into a beautiful park. Germany has built a park around World War II flack towers. Iris Miller, addressing McMillan, has delivered a fascinating lecture on how other cities have transformed such sites.

This historic and unique piece of public land should not be traded off for the sake of developing the southwest waterfront, a project that will inevitably be realized . It is too precious to the city and to the nation.

It is desirable to increase our housing stock, but the first order of the city should be to take inventory of the number of housing units it owns which still stand empty, the number perhaps approaching 1,000, and ensuring their rehabilitation. One reason the city continues to loose population is that it has no strategies for enhancing the quality of neighborhoods, an effort that would induce residents to stay here instead of emigrating to the suburbs.