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Summary of Capital Space Initiative Stakeholder Comments on Draft Capital Space Plan

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Background

In order to obtain informed stakeholder feedback, JSA scheduled twelve 60 minute free call-in slots when stakeholders could comment on the draft Capital Space Initiative Report they were sent via postal mail. Stakeholders were informed via an enclosed letter of the opportunity for comment, the toll-free number and the schedule for calls. JSA staff scheduled morning and afternoon slots. Discussions with participants were digitally recorded. Participants received assurance that remarks would be summarized without individual or organizational attribution.

Consultants recommended the following questions which were finalized by the partner group. Along with the draft Report, National Capital Planning Commission staff included the following five questions in the stakeholders mailing:

1. What are your general impressions of the draft report?
2. Did the draft address your priority issues?
3. What are the reports relative strengths and weaknesses?
4. As drafted, will the plan help your organization further its goals?
5. Do you have any comments regarding the physical design of the report?

Commenters:

Comments were received from the following individuals/organizations:

Richard Dolesh, Chief of Public Policy, National Recreation and Parks Association
Mary Filardo, Executive Director, 21st Century School Fund
Nancy Huvendick, 21st Century School Fund
Grace Manubay, Co-President, DC Environmental Education Consortium
Miles Groves, Penn Quarter Neighborhood Association



Overall Comments

Five individuals representing four stakeholder organizations responded to our request for input. Regardless of the small number of respondents, without exception, stakeholders expressed strong support for the Report's first draft. Their comments tended to their interest in specific sections of the Report rather than the entire draft. All respondents expressed one key concern by noting a lack of sufficient detail regarding the plan's implementation mechanism(s). Besides that point, some respondents asked questions for clarification about the Plan's sponsors, timeline and next steps which suggests that the Plan's horizon is not well understood.

Summarized Comments by Question

1. What are your general impressions of the draft report?

"I commend you for this excellent plan. This is a really well done plan."

"It's been a treat and fabulous to have this Initiative in the District. It focuses on what makes DC a great place to live and raise children."

"It's nice. Its easy to read and follow, well written....There are very good recommendations."

"It's a great briefing book...full of info I wasn't aware of."

All respondents communicated strong positive general impressions of the draft report. Almost everyone explicitly stated that their objective was to strengthen a well written and produced product.

2. Did the draft address your priority issues?

Every responded affirmatively to this question. However, stakeholders identified a number of specific areas where they wanted the report to communicate "a deeper drill". These included requests ranging from major explication to minor clarification. They highlighted the following policy arenas:

Absence of objectively defined measures of success: Each section should have a performance component. In the conclusion, add some metric that state what success looks like. The "how to get there step-by-step" is necessary.

Absence of estimated funding levels: There wasn't any mention of money in the recommendations. The lack of reference and specific recommendations re: capital infrastructure investment and maintenance was disconcerting. No mention of required funding or constraints in recommendations weakened credibility of recommendations. If schools are going to have to pay all the costs, it ends up being a huge subsidy to the public and that will require negotiations.



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Guidelines and standards: Right now, there are no guidelines and standards for schools and public space. Teachers should be able to park in shared space or in specially zoned areas. Putting a vision and a plan together is a beginning. But other pieces would included an assessment of conditions measured against some standards so public would know where each school yard stood against the standards.

Management of school yards: All successful “school yards to play grounds” programs are driven by binding and enforceable joint-use agreements. There should there be a 3rd party entity that manages public spaces in order to get beyond territoriality and turf management issues. There are multiple agencies managing schools yards. This is frustrating because there is no central accountability due to the number of agencies involved. If the purpose of green school yards is educational, perhaps accountability should reside in Chancellors office.

Changing user demographics and profile: Demographic data may not be accurate or show recent trends. The District government and Downtown BID are using data that may not reflect an accurate sample frame. There are many residential families and children living downtown now. There is new demand for downtown amenities by residential children as well as children who are dropped off by downtown workers. Downtown is no longer exclusively about single seniors. As downtown moves south and east, developers should be planning for urban parks and playground amenities

Absence of institutional responsibility to preserve open space: Preserving open space on school yards for communities is actually hard to do. Sidwell Friends, Cathedral, and Georgetown Day are building gyms underground. Wilson and Cardozo are building above ground gyms on smaller sites and in more dense area. We need public planning that keeps open space preserved. The Fine Arts Commission is not very good with open space either. Nobody is paying attention to site design. They do the school but they don't think about space design of new schools and public facilities.

Institutional implementation and accountability: There is a need for more strategic planning and more attention to implementation. An implementation planning process that is public and inclusive is essential. However, there is no multi-sectoral “table” set in a way that is diverse, representative and operationally successful. Diversity is good, but it can produce contradictions too. But stakeholders want to see recommendations implemented.

Civic engagement and communications: The Report could use one more translation in order to make it more publicly accessible. The recommendations were a bit insular in that they don't go much beyond land use planning. The concern is that there are not enough handles for advocates to grasp in order to engage the lift necessary for sustained implementation.



3. What are the reports relative strengths and weaknesses?

Though highly positive, participants identified a number of specific areas where they felt the draft could be strengthened further if they were developed more fully. The following areas of strength and weakness included:

Strengths

- “Commend utilization of public school yards for public benefit and recreation.”
- “Concepts are cutting edge.”
- “It’s been wonderful to see public schools finally integrated into municipal planning.”
- “I was very pleased after my first read.”
- “The focus on use of green spaces in schools was not sugar coated.”
- “Safety and security concerns were balanced with accessibility concerns.”

Weaknesses

- How will green infrastructure vision be achieved?
- Which habitat’s or species need to be protected?
- How exactly will ecosystems be managed and wildlife be conserved?
- Where exactly are the potential public benefits?
- How will safe routes to school yards be created and sustained, especially to promote after hours and weekend use of school yards?
- More specifics needed on managing and promoting indigenous species and natural habitat’s identified in the District
- Draft doesn’t adequately explain adaptation and mitigation strategies for climate change.
- Can there be a better statement of how urban forest and parks are integrated into larger city-wide urban forestry plan for DC?
- Why is there no mention of the problems and challenges homeless people present?
- Report should present more specifics on incorporation of sustainable urban agriculture into small city parks...
- There is no evaluation of how brownfields will be addressed, especially use and conversion of environmentally damaged sites to park and recreational usage
- How can wildlife interpretation be furthered?
- Where are specific sustainable landscapes?
- Where did six big ideas come from? Why only six? Why those six?
- There is no mention of control of exotics and invasives.
- Tie development of smaller urban parks to livable communities partnerships
- The last section on “Working with Others” needs specific strategies about cooperative agreements
- Urban parks section doesn’t have as much heft as other sections
- Beyond what’s in school section, there is no mention of playgrounds downtown.
- Photos are off on a number of pages.
- District owes it to its residents that people who cannot pay have access to fields



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- DC needs to employ DC youth and post incarceration residents as horticulturalists, arborists, etc.

4. As drafted, will the plan help your organization further its goals?

All respondents expressed a desire to partner in some organized and systematic way with implementing the Capital Space Initiative. Interestingly, three of the stakeholders expressed their ability to bring resources to a partnership that could operate in an environment of minimum politicization, systematic application and centralized accountability. Stakeholders expressed willingness to help implement Report's recommendations. They can contribute experience and best practices re: maintenance and help develop guidelines and standards.

5. Do you have any comments regarding the physical design of the report?

"...very easy to read, good use of white space, etc...."
"very well laid out, fun to read, loved the history."

All respondents gave the draft high marks for design, presentation, information mapping and production values.

Conclusions

Despite the small number of respondents, the opportunity delivered high quality input that will likely strengthen the final draft report and potentially lead to new implementation partnerships.

