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Locals push to expand the Mall

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Tom Ramstack - Local support is building to expand the Mall but the federal legislation it would require is more elusive.

“There is a point where you would over-monumentize the Mall,” said Washington Mayor Adrian M. Fenty, whose position that more monuments require more space is shared by local real-estate developers, the advocacy group National Coalition to Save Our Mall and D.C. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton.

Mr. Fenty spoke yesterday during a meeting of Commercial Real Estate Women, a trade group, at a downtown hotel. Five major memorials are tentatively planned to be built on or near the Mall, including the Eisenhower Memorial and the national memorial for Martin Luther King.

Today, the National Park Service is scheduled to make a presentation to the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts seeking approval for a 25,000-square-foot underground Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitor Center. It would be located on a 5.2-acre site just north of the Lincoln Memorial.

Developer Jeffrey S. Abramson, a partner in North Bethesda-based Tower Companies, wants to build a “Tower of Invincibility” on the Mall as a monument to the science of peace.

With more proposals for monuments than places to build them, the National Capital Planning Commission proposed a “no-build zone” to preserve part of the Mall as an open space. In 2003, Congress amended the Commemorative Works Act to make a no-build zone part of the law.

“This action was helpful in quelling some, but by no means all of the demand from groups for placement on what they view as the Mall,” Mrs. Norton said.

Last week, Mrs. Norton, the District’s Democratic nonvoting delegate to Congress, introduced legislation that would expand the boundaries of the Mall and require the secretary of the interior to develop a plan to add cultural amenities.

It envisions redrawing East Potomac Park, Banneker Overlook, the grounds of RFK Stadium, the Kennedy Center Plaza and the new South Capitol gateway as sites that would be defined as part of the Mall. All of them could host monuments and museums that various groups ask to be put on the Mall.

Boosting the local tourism industry and urban revitalization are as much of a motivation for her as protecting the nation's monuments.

"The off-Mall sites for monuments complement the creation of entire new neighborhoods now under way near the Mall, particularly the District's redevelopment of the Southwest waterfront and my own Southeast Federal Center work, now known as The Yards, that is becoming a mixed-use public-private development and waterfront park," she said.

Even the staunchest supporters of an expanded Mall say local plans alone will not make it happen.

"It's going to happen," said Judy Scott Feldman, chairwoman of the National Coalition to Save Our Mall. "I know it's going to happen. It's just a question of when."

Everything depends on federal leadership, she said.

"It's just a matter of Congress saying yes," Mrs. Feldman said.

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