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Eagle editorial: Ike memorial overdue

It was encouraging to see the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts grant general approval Thursday to Frank Gehry's design for the Dwight D. Eisenhower Memorial. The national tribute to the 34th president and the supreme commander of the Allied forces in World War II is long overdue, considering it was authorized by Congress 14 years and two presidents ago.

The four-acre urban site in Washington, D.C., could not be more reflective of the Kansan's life and two terms as president. What will be known as Eisenhower Square is in front of the Education Department, which he established as a Cabinet-level agency in 1953; next door to the Federal Aviation Administration, which was created during his administration in 1958; and across the street from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, whose story is wedded to the Eisenhower-era establishment of NASA.

And the value of Eisenhower's legacy only seems to deepen, especially given his roles in passing the nation's first two civil rights acts since Reconstruction and in upholding the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 ruling desegregating public schools.

Though the \$142 million project also needs congressional reauthorization and National Park Service approval, the arts commission's 3-1 vote should help its momentum. The project been stalled for more than a year by objections to the design raised by Eisenhower's relatives and some groups.

No one wants to disrespect the family's wishes, so efforts toward consensus should continue.

But Gehry is an unrivaled star among architects working today. And controversies over memorial and monument designs are common; they often must be built and experienced to be embraced. Consider what the Vietnam Veterans Memorial's "Wall" has come to mean to the nation, after being fiercely opposed for its unconventional simplicity and artist.

Plus, trying to correct the perceived problems with Gehry's design might mean downplaying Eisenhower's boyhood, which his fellow Kansans know was integral to his makeup and leadership. Although the memorial includes statues and stone carvings, the point of contention has been the plan to surround the space on three sides with large metal "tapestries" depicting the Kansas landscape of Eisenhower's youth. Such emphasis properly frames, rather than diminishes, the enormous scale of Eisenhower's achievements, as it accurately reflects Eisenhower's famous declaration that "the proudest thing I can claim is that I am from Abilene."

The commissioners made a suggestion to eliminate two small side tapestries, leaving the large one as a backdrop. The change would cut down on the number of large stone columns in the design, and give the park a more open atmosphere.

Now, the Kansas delegation should step up its efforts to see the Eisenhower Memorial through to completion, and fight off a House bill to start over (at an unacceptable cost estimated by the Congressional Budget Office last week to be \$17 million).

Each delay only postpones the day when visitors to the nation's capital can learn about Eisenhower's inspiring life and historic accomplishments – and better understand not only why so many liked Ike but why Ike so liked Kansas.

For the editorial board, Rhonda Holman

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