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Eisenhower Memorial clears key hurdle on Gehry design



The National Capital Planning Commission gave preliminary approval to a revised Gehry plan. (Gehry Partners/AP)

By Peggy McGlone October 2 at 6:35 PM

A government planning agency granted preliminary approval Thursday to a smaller version of the controversial Frank Gehry design for the Dwight D. Eisenhower Memorial.

The 10-to-1 vote by the National Capital Planning Commission represented a significant milestone for the tribute to the World War II general and 34th president, [which has been stalled since 2011](#). The vote allows the Eisenhower Memorial Commission to take its new design to the Commission of Fine Arts, the other federal agency that must give a green light before construction can begin.

The vote came after a robust discussion of the function and scale of key elements of the memorial, to be built on four acres along Independence Avenue SW.

The new plan removes two smaller stainless steel tapestries to open the view toward the Capitol, a priority of the NCPC and one of three reasons the panel had denied its approval in April.

But the design retains a 447-foot-long tapestry along the southern edge — used to depict Eisenhower's Midwestern roots — as well as two free-standing columns at its northern corners.

The move required four separate votes because after approving the measure, the panel discovered that it wanted to revise its earlier recommendation that a 2,500-square-foot ranger contact station, with restrooms and a bookstore, be removed. The new plan includes the building.

Gehry, who did not attend the meeting, hailed the panel's vote.

“Like anyone who might be chosen for such a commission, I have felt humbled to be working on the memorial for Dwight D. Eisenhower, one of the towering figures of the 20th century, whom I deeply admire as a president, a general and a man. I’m grateful to the National Capital Planning Commission for its decision, and for its cooperative engagement in resolving the issues,” Gehry said in an e-mail.

Shane Dettman, NCPC director of urban design, presented the staff’s recommendation that the panel approve the edited version, saying the “modern and innovative design” appropriately addressed previously discussed issues.

The commission wanted Gehry to expand sightlines of the Capitol from the memorial, improve its relationship to the surrounding buildings and enhance the Maryland Avenue right of way, a key piece of the District’s historic and symbolic design.

Eleven citizens addressed the panel, including two members of the Eisenhower Commission who offered dissenting views. Bruce Cole asked the panel to deny the compromise, while the co-chairwoman, Susan Banes Harris, sought its approval.

There was dissent within the NCPC, too, especially regarding an amendment asking Gehry to relocate or remove the two free-standing limestone columns. The motion failed in a 5-to-4 vote, with two members abstaining.

Ellen McCarthy questioned the function of the columns and supported the amendment, but Tommy Wells argued passionately for them.

“The columns announce that you are at a memorial, not just a new park, a new plaza,” he said. “They are important.”

Mina Wright took up the case.

“We are now mid-slope on the slippery slope of design by committee,” she said. “I urge my colleagues to resist that temptation.”

“That’s our job,” countered McCarthy.