

## Research Findings for the Citizens Guide to Recreation on the National Mall

The National Mall is a prime location for recreational activities in Washington DC including large athletic fields, baseball/softball diamonds, a rugby field, golf course, volleyball and tennis courts as well as other recreational facilities. To see how this great resource is functioning, the National Coalition to Save Our Mall investigated the experience of the Mall's sports and recreation users. This was done through a research program that preceded the development of the **Citizens Guide to Recreation and Sports on the National Mall**. In the process, many sports clubs told us what they like about the park, and where improvements could be made. In an effort to help improve recreational opportunities on the National Mall, the points below will explain the three biggest problems with the National Mall and Potomac Parks which have been identified by its sports and recreation users, as well as their suggestions for improving both the physical condition and the operation of the Mall.

### **Issue #1**

After talking with many sports clubs, the first concern found with the National Mall and Potomac Parks was the condition of the grounds and facilities. A lack of bathrooms, working water fountains, lighting, storage facilities, poor trash control, narrow pathways and poorly maintained fields were of concern to users.

- A lack of bathrooms is mainly found in West and East Potomac Park. There are many bathrooms on the National Mall, but most are located in the museums lining the mall. This makes the bathrooms difficult to access.
- There are few water fountains around the National Mall and Potomac Parks, and many of the water fountains that are in the area do not work.
- Lighting is not existent on the athletic fields making night play impossible and games taking place during dusk difficult.
- Furthermore, there are no temporary storage facilities for the clubs who are regular users to keep their equipment in.
- Trash pickup is another concern not only because of its unsightliness, but also because it encourages trash to be thrown on the ground.
- Narrow pathways make it difficult for cyclists to get around in some locations of the park, but trails are generally in good condition.
- Finally, poorly maintained fields were a concern to practically all clubs. Fields have grass that is dying and many of the fields have uneven and badly drained playing surfaces.

### **Solution #1**

Suggestions for solving these problems are many, but lack of funding may be one of the biggest factors. One way to improve facilities and grounds is to allow volunteer groups to help maintain and improve the grounds.

- Leaders of several teams say that they have offered to help maintain the fields and have been turned down by the NPS.
- If properly organized and directed volunteers could help maintain the grass, raise funds to install facilities (bathrooms, storage rooms, etc.) and participate

in the upkeep of the parks. However, this needs not only to be accepted but also encouraged by the National Park Service.

### **Issue #2**

The second area of concern is the difficulty in acquiring permits from the NPS and locating open fields. Sports clubs had problems acquiring permits because of the confusion raised by having two permitting authorities, DC Parks and Recreation and the NPS. They mentioned that the rules for obtaining a permit changed from year to year, and that it was hard to figure out the process. The Coalition also had a difficult time figuring out the permitting process after talking with the NPS and DC Parks and Recreation. There is very little communication between DC Parks and Recreation, the NPS, and citizens.

- Locating open fields on the National Mall and Potomac Parks was also a difficulty for sports clubs. Clubs did not know which fields were being used by other teams, closed for maintenance, or being used for special events.
- When fields that were not permitted were open, rules regulating how to use the field were vague. Teams did not know if they had to have a person watch the field to claim it or if they could post a sign in the morning to claim the field.

### **Solution #2**

A simplified permitting process is needed, and a website where all permits can be obtained would be helpful.

- This website could link into a calendar that informs viewers which fields have already been permitted for. Rules explaining field usage and how to claim first come first serve fields could also be located on this website. This website would limit the confusion found in working with two government agencies, and would make it easier for citizens to obtain information from the NPS and DC Parks and Recreation.

### **Issue #3**

Transportation and vehicle parking is the third problem facing the National Mall and Potomac Parks.

- While parking is easier after rush hour when street parking is opened up on the north side of the National Mall, parking is very difficult to find during rush hour around the National Mall and regularly in West Potomac Park. And these are the peak hours when many sports games begin.
- Bicycle parking is also lacking around the National Mall and Potomac Parks. There is sufficient bicycle parking around the museums, but more bike parking is needed around the Jefferson, FDR, Vietnam, Korean and Lincoln Memorial as well as in the Potomac Parks.
- Furthermore, long-term overnight bicycle parking is needed for commuters to and from the Mall. At long term parking locations there should be bike aid

stations that allow people to pump up their tires and fix common bike problems.

- Not only is parking needed, but maps and signage are also needed to show people how to get around the parks.
- Finally the NPS needs to work with the city to better integrate bike paths and bike lanes into the roads surrounding the Mall so that people can ride their bikes to and from the National Mall. These need to be accompanied by bike light signals and longer crossing times for pedestrians.

### **Solution #3**

To solve these problems, the first step is to identify the various categories of users that need to be accommodated.

- There are residents who use the infrastructure for shorter (2-4 hours) periods, often for recreational purposes, tourists who may stay all day, and federal employees who park all day on weekdays. There are currently parking spaces by the Tidal Basin that are only available to federal employees in nearby office buildings. More parking around and on the National Mall should be exclusively designed for visitors of the National Mall, and parking should be split up for day parking, tourists, and recreational users:
  - Parking for recreational sites should be provided near the fields.
  - Parking for tourists should include both hourly and some remote sites.
  - Parking for Federal employees should be located elsewhere and this parking should be opened to the public when not in use on the weekends.
  - Maps, improved pathways, and bike parking should be done collaboratively with volunteer groups as funding may be of importance for improvements.

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, there are three areas that need improvement on the National Mall to better accommodate sports clubs and those who visit the Mall for recreational purposes:

1. The first is the improvement of facilities (bathrooms, sports fields, etc.) around the National Mall and Potomac Parks, which might be accomplished with the help of volunteer groups.
2. The second problem is the permitting process and allocation of field space, this can be improved with the creation of a website that distributes permits, lists rules, and shows field status.
3. The third problem is transportation and parking. Solving this will be the most difficult of all. The Mall needs an economical rapid circulator system to augment the interpretive Tourmobile. It also needs to develop more short term parking nearby the athletic fields, reserved for team use during critical game start-up times. The integration of bicycle and pedestrian paths is also vital to the visitor experience of our National Mall.