

Boathouse faces environmental study, suit

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The National Park Service will conduct an environmental assessment of the impacts of the proposed Georgetown University boathouse at a site north of Thompson's Boat House on the Potomac River.

The Park Service and Georgetown University must amend a 1997 Memorandum of Agreement that limits the boathouse to a footprint of 15,000 square feet, according to a Park Service statement released Thursday. The latest boathouse proposal calls for 18,600 square feet, the release explains.

The Park Service conducted an environment assessment of the boathouse project in 1995, but at that time, it addressed only ramifications of the land exchange between the Park Service and Georgetown University, said Kevin Brandt, superintendent for the C&O Canal National Historic Park. It did not consider the impact of the boathouse's actual construction, Brandt explained Friday at a meeting of the C&O Canal Historic Park Advisory Commission.

The Park Service's environmental assessment announcement came exactly one week after the Washington Canoe Club and Chesapeake & Ohio Canal Association filed a joint lawsuit against the Park Service and the U.S. Department of Interior. The suit contends that the two entities violated the National Environmental Policy Act when they moved forward with Georgetown's boathouse proposal.

According to the legal complaint, the Park Service violated the environmental act when it did not prepare an environmental impact statement or investigate alternatives to the land exchange, which would allow the university to swap land it owns upstream for the federal land upon which it plans to build a boathouse. The property lies near the entrance to the Capital Crescent Trail.

Although the Park Service has not responded formally to the lawsuit, Washington Canoe Club president Larry Schuette said he sees the agency and university's decision to conduct an environmental assessment as a direct response. "We see the environmental assessment as a positive sign. It is the first step to following the [National Environmental Policy Act] process," Schuette said Tuesday in an interview.

The Canoe Club and the Canal Association are also charging that the defendants violated their 1997 Memorandum of Agreement under the National Historic Preservation Act when they approved the boathouse's larger footprint without an amendment to the memorandum.

The plaintiffs also hold the Park Service and Department of Interior responsible for not complying with the Land, Water and Conservation Act, which prohibits the Park Service from exchanging federal land for another parcel of lesser value.

Since an appraiser determined Georgetown's property upstream to be "unbuildable" in the spring of 1999, the land cannot be of the same value as the "buildable" federal property the Park Service intends to exchange for it, according to the complaint.

Neither the Park Service nor the Department of Interior has responded to the legal action, said the plaintiffs' lawyer, Andrea Ferster. Settling the issue could take around a year if the case goes into litigation, she said in an interview Tuesday.

Acting on similar concerns, the C&O Canal National Historical Park Advisory Commission passed a resolution Friday morning making similar demands to those included in the Canoe Club and Canal Association's lawsuit.

In July, the commission — which advises the Department of Interior on matters concerning the C&O Canal — was blindsided during its quarterly meeting when the National Park Service demonstrated with balloons at the river how high the Georgetown boathouse would stand. It was then that the commission learned that the building would rise well over the towpath.

The Park Service, university architects and commissioners agreed in July to meet and discuss the boathouse. However, chair Sheila Weidenfeld said the commission did not hear from the Park Service or the university until the Park Service's press release arrived Thursday.

According to the commission's notes, the superintendent's office had expected the university to resubmit boathouse plans by the end of August, but no drawings were submitted to the Park Service.

No Georgetown University official attended the commission's meeting Friday. University spokesperson Laura Cavender said in a phone interview on Tuesday that the university looks forward to working with Park Service on the environmental assessment.

The process will start with a public-scoping meeting in mid-November, according to the National Park Service.

The commission reconsidered supporting the boathouse concept in light of discoveries about the project's vetting process, commissioner George Lewis, who represents Frederick, MD said at Friday's meeting.

The commission limited the scope of its resolution to specific points commissioners wanted addressed in the environmental assessment. It does not address the appropriateness of the boathouse concept.

Some commissioners questioned whether the environmental assessment could be completed in good faith by those who had been overseeing the boathouse proposal in the past.

The National Park Service officials who oversaw the boathouse will continue managing the boathouse, said Terry Carlstrom, the park's regional director.

Some commissioners, including James Gilford, considered it a mistake to question the Park Service employees' motives. "I think it is a waste of our time to try and figure out whether there is a fox in the chicken house," commissioner James Gilford said.

According to Brandt, the environmental assessment can include upward of 20 different scenarios.