

NWcurrent 12/5/07

THE CURRENT

Agency orders study on GU boathouse

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The National Park Service announced Monday that it will conduct another study on the possible effects of Georgetown University's plan to build a boathouse in the C&O Canal National Historic Park.

After completing an environmental assessment in April 2006, the Park Service deliberated for a year and a half on whether to conduct a more-intense environmental impact statement. Officials decided to take the additional step based on the 2,500-plus public comments they received after releasing the

environmental assessment, according to a Park Service official. They also considered the White House Council on Environmental Quality's guidelines for deciding on the need for an environmental impact study, said the official.

Georgetown University wants to build a collegiate boathouse on a piece of national parkland fronting the Potomac River west of K Street. The building would have an 18,682-square-foot footprint and sit near the C&O Canal towpath and Capital Crescent Trail. The Park Service is not allowed to sell federal land, so the university would acquire the site by exchanging some university-

owned land located upstream and inside the park grounds.

In a letter to the Georgetown University crew community dated Monday, university athletics director Bernard Muir wrote: "While we would have preferred for the NPS to approve our boathouse plans, we respect its judgment that continued analysis is needed. We appreciate the acknowledgement of the merits of our proposal and remain committed to building a new boathouse, which will not only greatly enhance the programmatic and training needs of our student-athletes but also beautify the Potomac waterfront for the entire community."

(cont.)

The project has enjoyed strong support from the area's high school crew community, which would gain more space in a nearby National Park Service boathouse that is now used in part by Georgetown University.

Critics of the boathouse proposal said a second look is merited. They have said the new building would harm the surrounding environment, including the embankment on which the historic towpath rests, the popular Capital Crescent Trail and nearby wildlife.

"Any collegiate boathouse, or any boathouse that would satisfy the requirements of Georgetown University and its rowing program ... in the C&O Canal historic park would do violence to the scenic and historic features of the canal," said Bob Morris, a leader in the local chapter of the Sierra Club.

According to a National Park Service statement, the study will examine alternatives to locating the boathouse within the C&O Canal National Historical Park, which opponents say is too fragile to house it. The study will consider, for instance, locating it near 34th and K streets within the Georgetown Waterfront Park, or on the university-owned site one mile upstream.

"There are technical, environmental, financial reasons to build outside the C&O Canal park, as well as safety and legal reasons," said Sally Strain, a boathouse critic.

Another alternative would reduce the overall size of the boathouse to 15,000 square feet and the maximum height of 40 feet. The university originally requested a height of 51 feet.

The last option, a "no action" alternative, will study the effects of not pursuing the boathouse.

According to the statement, the study will consider the "constructability" of the boathouse or other development on the universi-

ty-owned site, the possible impact of construction on wildlife and wetlands, and the impact of the project on the nearby Washington Canoe Club and other nearby boat clubs, such as Thompson Boat Center.

The National Park Service hopes to issue a draft environmental impact statement for comment to the public in late spring, according to the Park Service official.

Though she supports the new study, Strain said its scope is too narrow. She said Georgetown University and George Washington University should pool their resources together to build a joint collegiate boathouse that would be open to the public, patterning it after Thompson Boat Center, which several rowing programs use. She said this option should be considered as part of the study.

George Washington University has preliminary plans to build a boathouse at 34th and K streets on the Georgetown waterfront. Strain said that location would be "ideal for development" because it is on degraded land and would be more accessible to the public.

Regarding the joint boathouse proposal, Georgetown University spokesperson Julie Green Bataille wrote in an e-mail to *The Current*: "Georgetown has not taken a position on possibilities related to this kind of project that are outside the scope of the EIS and we will wait for the NPS' process to take place before making any final assessments."

Strain said the study should also consider the big picture. "The EIS should be part of a comprehensive study of all of the recreational needs along the river, not just the needs of one group of rowers of one private university," she said.

The National Park Service will hold a public meeting at St. John's Georgetown Episcopal Church, 3240 O St., from 6:30 to 9 p.m. Tuesday. Attendees are invited to provide input on the study's scope.

Additionally, the Park Service will accept written comments through Jan. 18.