

PUBLIC OVERSIGHT ROUNDTABLE

THE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS AND THE ENVIRONMENT CAROL SCHWARTZ, CHAIR

The Quality of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers and the Chesapeake Bay and the Proposed Construction of a New Georgetown University Boathouse

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 22, 2005 – 10:00 AM

I am Alma Gates, chair of ANC 3D. Thank you Chairman Schwartz for the opportunity to present testimony before the committee today.

Over the past year, ANC 3D has written several unacknowledged emails and letters to the National Park Service outlining the commission's concern about the proposed exclusive Georgetown University boathouse that would be located within the C&O National Historical Park. It would have a footprint of 19,000 square feet; is 290 feet long, 54 feet tall and 85 feet wide, and its dock would protrude a distance of 75 feet in to the Potomac River. The proposed structure would completely eclipse river views from users of the Capital Crescent Trail and tower 21 feet above the C&O Canal and seven feet above Canal Road. Three commissioners, whose Single Member Districts include most of the C&O Canal National Historical Park that lies within the District of Columbia, have expressed concern about and opposition to what is being proposed by NPS and Georgetown University.

Mary Caroline Robbins, art and landscape design writer made a bold claim in the January 1897 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* -- "The parks and park systems are the most important artistic work which has been done in the United States."¹ ANC 3D would agree with M.C. Robbins, but given our recent experience with NPS and Betty Brown Casey, the commission has begun to wonder why the preservation and stewardship of federal parkland are no longer priorities for the National Park Service. What has happened that NPS would entertain a proposal from a nonprofit institution to swap a small inaccessible and unusable parcel of bottomland in the park for prime waterfront parkland and to remove it from the public realm for a private boathouse? A number of organizations including the Audubon Naturalist Society, the C&O Canal Association, the DC Chapter of the Sierra Club and the National Parks Conservation Association have also expressed opposition to the taking of federal parkland for a private boathouse. We are here today because the entity charged with the protection and stewardship of the nation's parks and parkland is not following its federal mandate.

On January 19, 2005, ANC 3D wrote to Joe Lawler, Regional Director of the National Park Service and followed up with a letter to Fran Mainella on April 23, 2005, requesting that an Environmental Impact Statement be undertaken for the entire non-motorized

¹ Mary Caroline Robbins, "Park-Making as a Public Art." *The Atlantic Monthly* 79 (January 1897). 86.

boathouse zone as well as the larger boating area that would include Thompson's Boat Center and the Virginia shore. Since that time the NPS has scaled back the Virginia study to an Environmental Assessment in what appears to be a quick fix rather than a comprehensive study.

Do not be fooled. What is currently proposed will not recreate Thomas Eakins' familiar canvas of a single rower, "Mac Schmitt in a Single Scull" on the Schuylkill River at Philadelphia just above the Girard Avenue Bridge. Nor will it ensure replication of Eakins' weathered boathouses nestled into the Schuylkill River shoreline. It is those romantic picturesque scenes that NPS and Georgetown University would have you and the public believe will be recreated on the park site selected for a collegiate boathouse along the fragile shore of the Potomac River. The days of the genteel Philadelphia rower and weathered boathouses have passed just as the days of stewardship of federal parkland appear to be part of a bygone era. A new canvas is being prepared and what will be painted depicts the destruction of the most important artistic work which has been done in the United States – a national historical park.

If Mary Caroline Robbins was correct, that our parks are the most important artistic work which has been done in the United States, and I agree with her bold claim, now is the time to act and to consider an alternative site and size for the Georgetown University boathouse that is outside the C&O Canal National Historical Park.