

Defenders Correspond with NPS on GU Boathouse, August – September, 2010

In a message sent on August 16, 2010, Sally Strain of the Defenders of Potomac River Parkland asked the National Park Service for an update on the Environmental Impact Study concerning the Georgetown University boathouse proposal. She also pointed out the many reasons why GU's plan to build an intrusive private structure on a site within the borders of the C&O Canal National Historical Park is not in the public interest.

Her message was sent to the NPS official with oversight responsibility for the study process, Peter May, Associate Regional Director, Lands, Resources, and Planning for the National Capital Region. Mr. May replied on September 19. The text of the correspondence is below:

Letter from Sally Strain:

August 16, 2010

Dear Mr. May:

The purpose of this letter is to inquire about the status of the Georgetown University (GU) boathouse proposal, and to encourage NPS to eliminate from further consideration the C&O Canal National Historical Park/EA site that is currently proposed for the private facility. The proposal is not in the public interest.

A Washington Post article of August 6, "Construction restarts on park in Georgetown," describes a costly "surprise" encountered during the construction work on the Georgetown Waterfront Park, resulting in a \$1 million cost overrun for NPS and \$950,000 for the DC government. These expenses are related to the discovery/removal of a concrete "floor" underground and the upgrading of an electrical system required for the project.

Another type of "floor" -- the concrete 72"-diameter Potomac Interceptor, a major sewer line -- runs directly underground at the proposed GU boathouse site. If the pipe were to rupture during construction, serious contamination of the shoreline and Potomac River would probably occur. Obviously, this, too, would be a costly "surprise."

Defenders of Potomac River Parkland, a coalition of 26 member organizations, remains deeply opposed to GU's current proposal to build a massive private boathouse at this location. For seven years, we have offered many reasons why the current plan is not in the public interest: the site is a narrow, scenic, wooded, section of parkland located within the C&O Canal NHPark, between the busy Capital Crescent Trail and the Potomac River; it is situated next to the fragile and historic Canal towpath; it is a tidal floodplain that contains wetlands; it lies within the Potomac Gorge, one of the most biologically rich areas on the East Coast; and the parkland is part of a national, regional and local treasure used by thousands of daily walkers, bikers, birders, historians and visitors to the city. These technical, environmental, economic, safety and practical considerations provide enough reasons for NPS to deny GU's request to build a private facility in the C&O Canal NHPark and on top of the Potomac Interceptor.

As we mentioned to NPS Director Jonathan Jarvis in our letter to him of October 16, 2009, an alternative location outside of the C&O Canal NHPark would provide advantages for everyone, while protecting the park from inappropriate development. In addition, a more accessible location downstream from the narrow C&O gateway corridor might even make it possible for a new GU boathouse to be shared with other boating communities, including high school boating programs, instead of being used by only one group of athletes from one private university.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. We will contact you after Labor Day to discuss the matter further.

Sincerely,

Sally Strain,
DC Coordinator, Defenders of Potomac River Parkland

Peter May's reply:

September 19, 2010

Dear Ms. Strain,

Thank you for your email regarding the Georgetown University boathouse proposal.

The National Park Service (NPS) is mindful of the concerns raised by the Defenders of Potomac River Parkland and others regarding the potential impacts of locating a large boathouse on the land immediately upriver of the Washington Canoe Club. We also recognize that the Potomac River is used by a multitude of recreational users and athletic programs and that there is a need for more and better facilities to support those uses.

The NPS has been studying the need for non-motorized boating facilities along the Potomac River for a number of years. However, the plans to develop such facilities as proposed in the 1985 Specialized Study on Non-Motorized Boating on the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers have not been implemented for a variety of reasons. The NPS is exploring opportunities to revisit the 1985 study - an effort that will likely entail additional planning, environmental analysis, and substantial public engagement. In addition, the NPS is preparing to restart an Environmental Assessment that will examine alternatives for establishing a non-motorized boating facility along the Potomac in Virginia.

We welcome the participation of the Defenders of Potomac River Parkland in the process of evaluating and planning for non-motorized boating facilities on the Potomac River and we will be sure to contact you and other interested parties when public meetings commence. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Peter May

Associate Regional Director, Lands, Resources, and Planning
National Park Service - National Capital Region