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Catalyzing a Waterfront Neighborhood

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“Near Southeast” is one of Washington, D.C.’s forgotten neighborhoods. Merely blocks from the U.S. Capitol, it is severed from Capitol Hill by a railroad and an elevated freeway, saturated with public housing and sealed off from the Anacostia River by the Washington Navy Yard and the Southeast Federal Center (SEFC), a mostly fallow tract of federal land.

But Near Southeast’s time finally may have come. The Navy is doubling its workforce there, moving in 5,000 personnel and inducing thousands of contractors to locate nearby. Meanwhile, Washington’s new mayor, Anthony Williams, is determined to make Washington a city of vibrant waterfront neighborhoods. Near Southeast is his, and perhaps best, chance to make a mark.

The U.S. General Services Administration, which manages federal real-estate operations, has patiently been planning for this day. It had already started environmental clean-up on the site and, after trying for a decade to develop SEFC as a federal office center, recently began considering a mixed-use future there.

So as opportunities for redeveloping SEFC come into focus, GSA’s National Capital Region and the city’s Office of Planning, with help from GSA’s Center for Urban Development and the Congress for the New Urbanism, sponsored a public charrette to examine the area’s future in more detail.

GSA’s goal was to help federal, city and local stakeholders sort out their visions, synchronize them and work out a plausible development plan. “We wanted to engage the neighbors, to introduce a bit of openness that we haven’t had,” said Tony Costa, assistant regional administrator of GSA’s National Capital Region.

District officials hoped to draw more local participants—already concerned about changes they

were seeing—into its waterfront planning process. And they wanted to send a clear message: “Southeast Federal Center is part of the waterfront and part of the neighborhood,” planning director Andrew Altman said.

An Historic Alignment

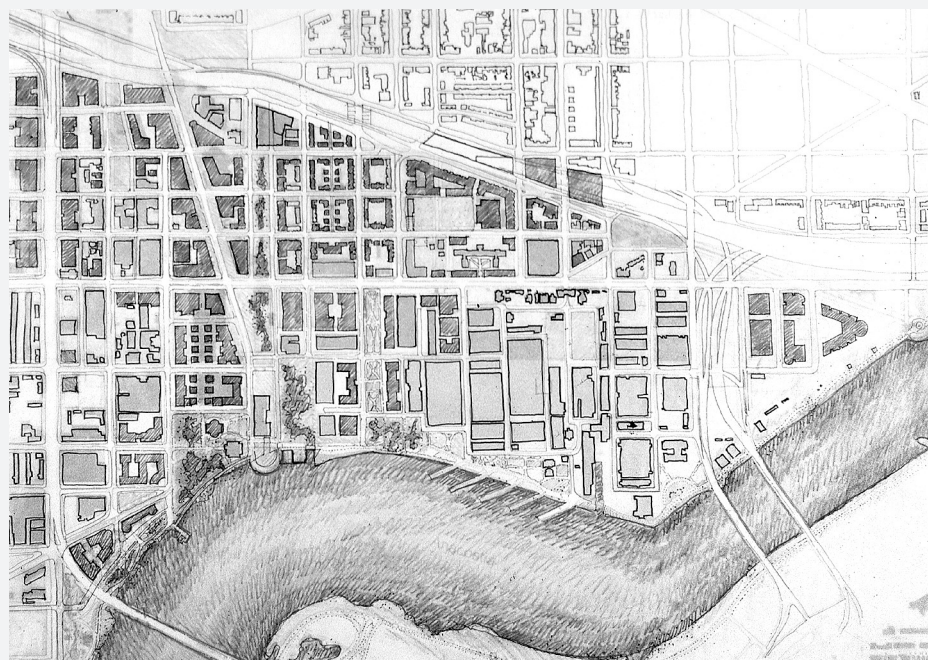
The Southeast Federal Center, once part of the Navy Yard, comprises 55 acres of factories and workshops that were decommissioned and transferred to GSA in 1963. In the early 1990s, GSA developed a plan for federal offices (5.6 million s.f., space for 23,500 employees) and supporting retail, but subsequently concluded that a broader mix of uses would be more viable.

Progress has come haltingly, though. In 1991, a Metrorail station opened next to SEFC, linking it to the regional rail network, but federal agencies were still reluctant to relocate there. A stronger catalyst has been the Navy’s decision to consolidate operations at the Navy Yard. The Navy has added one million s.f. of new office space on its

Top: Southeast Federal Center, figure ground

Bottom: Southeast Federal Center Charrette Proposal

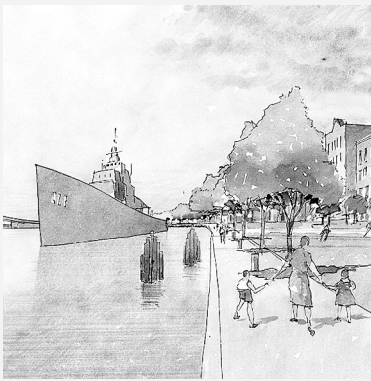
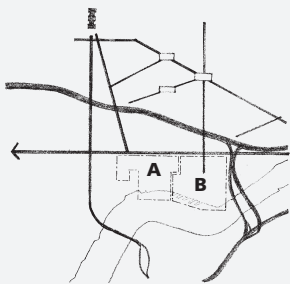
Graphics: Thadani Hetzel Partnership



base, and developers are erecting two new buildings along M Street for contractors.

The city and federal governments are hoping to accelerate the area's redevelopment while positioning it firmly within the city's broader waterfront vision. While the city is gearing up for an Anacostia waterfront master plan, Congress is reviewing legislation that would allow GSA to team with private developers to build non-federal projects, such as housing, at SEFC.

In March, local and federal agencies launched the "Anacostia Waterfront Initiative," committing their energies towards making the riverfront "a cohesive, attractive mixture of commercial, residential, recreational and open space." The compact provides the strongest hope Near Southeast has had in a long time, charrette leader Ken Greenberg observed: "This may be the moment when the people with the will and ability to pull this off are in the right seat at the right time."



Top: Near Southeast area of Washington, D.C., with Southeast Federal Center (A) and Navy Yard (B) indicated. Graphic: Nirbhik Bera

Bottom: Proposed riverfront walkway at Washington Navy Yard. Graphic: Thadani Hetzel Partnership

The Charrette

The charrette focused on what a new urban neighborhood, not a federal enclave or Harborfront-style destination, might look like. The work proceeded in an iterative process, with the planning team working in short, intense sessions interspersed with public workshops and presentations.

Ultimately, the charrette ratified the emerging concept of a mixed-use urban neighborhood—proposing “appropriately scaled” residential, public and commercial uses, including a park, museum, offices, shops and restaurants; various types and sizes of housing, affordable to a range of incomes; walkable streets and squares; and public waterfront access through the SEFC and Navy Yard.

The charrette also focused on a framework of big picture issues that are rarely resolved, and often not even addressed, in the normal course of events—but have the power to make specific planning and development decisions work together better:

- *How can the barriers that sever Near Southeast from nearby neighborhoods and the waterfront be penetrated?* The charrette proposed north-south corridors along four streets, each with a distinct visual, spatial or land-use character; pedestrian and ferry links across the river; narrowing M Street to tame traffic; and eventually replacing the freeway with a boulevard.

- *How can the scale of buildings and spaces be more intimate than is typical in new development?* The charrette proposed re-inserting streets mapped in the L'Enfant-Banneker plan (reducing block size) and recommended infill housing that reflects the density and texture of nearby Capitol Hill.

- *What form should the “green” and “blue” networks take?* The charrette proposed configuring the floodplain as wetlands or public space; providing public walkways along both sides of the river and piers, boats and bridges giving access over the river; daylighting a historic canal that leads into the city; and extending the L'Enfant-Banneker plan's pattern of formal public spaces into SEFC, culminating at a waterfront square.

- *How can revitalization proceed without creating a sense of winners and losers?* The charrette proposed a “social contract” of implementation processes that would provide access to decision-making and share the benefits of development. It proposed no net loss of public housing and employment-readiness efforts that link local residents to the influx of new jobs.

New Roles for GSA

GSA's charge is not only to serve other federal agencies, but also to manage public resources prudently and to pursue real-estate strategies that support local goals. The Southeast Federal Center initiative will challenge, and expand, GSA's ability to balance these goals in several ways.

The breadth of the collaboration. The Anacostia Waterfront Initiative had numerous signatories, from the local planning and housing agencies to

GSA and the National Park Service. The cooperative engagement of Navy officials, residents and property owners is unusual as well.

The depth of the partnership with local government. GSA co-sponsored the charrette with the District's planning office, and both agree on the fundamental vision of SEFC as the heart of a new urban neighborhood.

The wide area considered in the planning study. The charrette studied more than twice the area controlled by GSA and the Navy, with consensus that the implications of developing SEFC could reach even further. Thus, GSA clearly acknowledged that its activities can have a wide-ranging impact, and that it should actively engage those who are affected.

The consideration of GSA's typical development practices. Several charrette suggestions—such as joining with developers to build housing; setting aside valuable waterfront land for open space; and shifting storm and wastewater capital funds to “green infrastructure” and open space—would require GSA to adopt new ways of evaluating customer, public and community benefits.

The collaboration with professional resources. Teaming with the Congress for the New Urbanism advanced the Center's goal of providing the communities where it is working with professional expertise. One outcome: the charrette team's design and planning approach was influenced by a wider range of thinking than previous federal plans were.

Next Steps

Charrettes, by focusing intense energy on complex problems for short periods of time, can convey a sense of clarity and purpose that dissipates all too easily when participants go their separate ways. Who takes the next step, and how far can they stride, when there is no clear coordinating authority?

The District, even as it assembles a long-term



waterfront planning apparatus (an RFP for an Anacostia waterfront master plan was issued this summer), faces a current zoning crisis: The existing development rules for the areas around SEFC are inconsistent with the charrette's visions, and the site itself is not zoned, an issue if GSA spins land off to private developers.

GSA must decide what charrette recommendations to accept and how to formalize them; Costa says the ideas will be incorporated into a request for proposals that GSA hopes to circulate for public review in September. More immediately, GSA is considering whether to sell a site at SEFC to the Department of Transportation, and what the design requirements for that project might be.

One immediate issue will be timing: Will GSA's schedule for its RFP and the District's planning process keep pace with each other? Another will be paying for public infrastructure, such as the waterfront walkway, streets and squares, which will set expectations for the quality and character of the development.

Neither GSA nor the city can realize its goals without the other's cooperation, involvement and assistance. The charrette revealed that both share a similar vision, that both are ready to move forward, and that the new prospects for Near Southeast have energized the public. Their challenge is to find a mechanism for keeping the vision and the momentum alive, as decisions about the neighborhood continue to be made by many players.

Proposal for New Jersey Avenue as a civic boulevard
Graphic: Thadani Hetzel Partnership