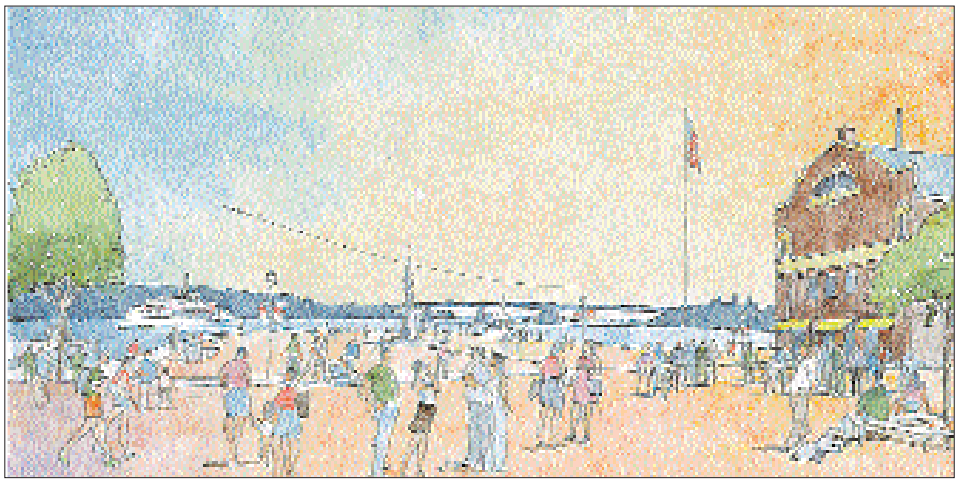
GSA Public Buildings Service

Catalyzing a Waterfront Neighborhood



A Report on the Washington, D.C. Waterfront Charrette
May, 2000

U.S. General Services Administration
Center for Urban Development
National Capital Region

District of Columbia
Office of Planning

Cover graphics: Thadani/Hetzel Partnership

GSA's Triple Bottom Line

Hillary Altman

As the nation's largest public real estate organization, the U.S. General Services Administration faces three stiff challenges. They are the A B C's that guide us: agency, business and community needs.

The first challenge, which is our mission, is to meet the real-estate requirements of federal agencies, our customers. Our activities support more than one million federal workers located in some 1,600 communities throughout the country.

The second, which is our responsibility to the American taxpayer, is to manage our five billion-dollar real-estate business effectively within our existing, and limited, authorities.

The third, which is our civic duty, is to be good neighbors in the communities where we have a presence. We are well aware of how federal development can help or, frankly, hinder local revitalization efforts.

The most daunting task of all is striking a day-to-day balance among these three often competing, yet critical, commitments. They are, in effect, our triple bottom line.

To begin to tackle that, GSA's Center for Urban Development recently hosted the "GSA Federal Buildings: Tools for Community Investment" forum at the Brookings Institution. The forum examined current real-estate trends and development patterns and considered how, in light of those circumstances, GSA can best use its assets to meet its challenges.

Our group of GSA leadership, national urban experts and members of the Congress for the New Urbanism generated ideas to help us shape future practices. In particular, we have introduced seven "Good Neighbor" guiding principles. First, we want to make strategic decisions about where we locate in metropolitan regions, paying special attention to implementing executive orders that require federal agencies to locate in or next to central business areas, particularly in historic buildings. The other principles are to promote community involvement and partnerships, offer transportation alternatives, invest in infill and urban locations, seek ways to leverage investment, promote mixed-use, live-work-play, twenty-four-hour cities, and consider the effect of technology on space needs.

Living up to these principles is paramount for us as we try to "practice our A B C's" on the projects we undertake every day. The Center for Urban Development's approach is to take on projects one by one, in collaboration with communities, allowing them to evolve as incubators of new ideas that could, ultimately, help shift our larger patterns of decisionmaking. We currently have some twenty projects under way around the country, each setting a unique example, each embodying the "Good Neighbor" guiding principles, each resulting in better, more vital places.

One of our first opportunities to address the Good Neighbor principles was in Washington, D.C., in May, 2000. The Center helped GSA's National Capital Region and the city assemble a team of national and community experts who looked at the re-use of a large federal parcel could help jump-start development of a vibrant, new urban waterfront neighborhood. We were able to introduce tools and generate ideas that have already begun to take hold. We hope these new ideas can intensify, set an example and cut across narrow agency, business and community interests.

Hillary Altman was Director of the Center for Urban Development, U.S. General Services Administration, from 1999 to 2001.

Catalyzing a Waterfront Neighborhood

Todd W. Bressi

"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 first, 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

Top: Southeast Federal Center and surrounding area, figure ground

Bottom: Southeast Federal Center Charrette, proposed land-use plan

Graphics: Thadani Hetzel Partnership

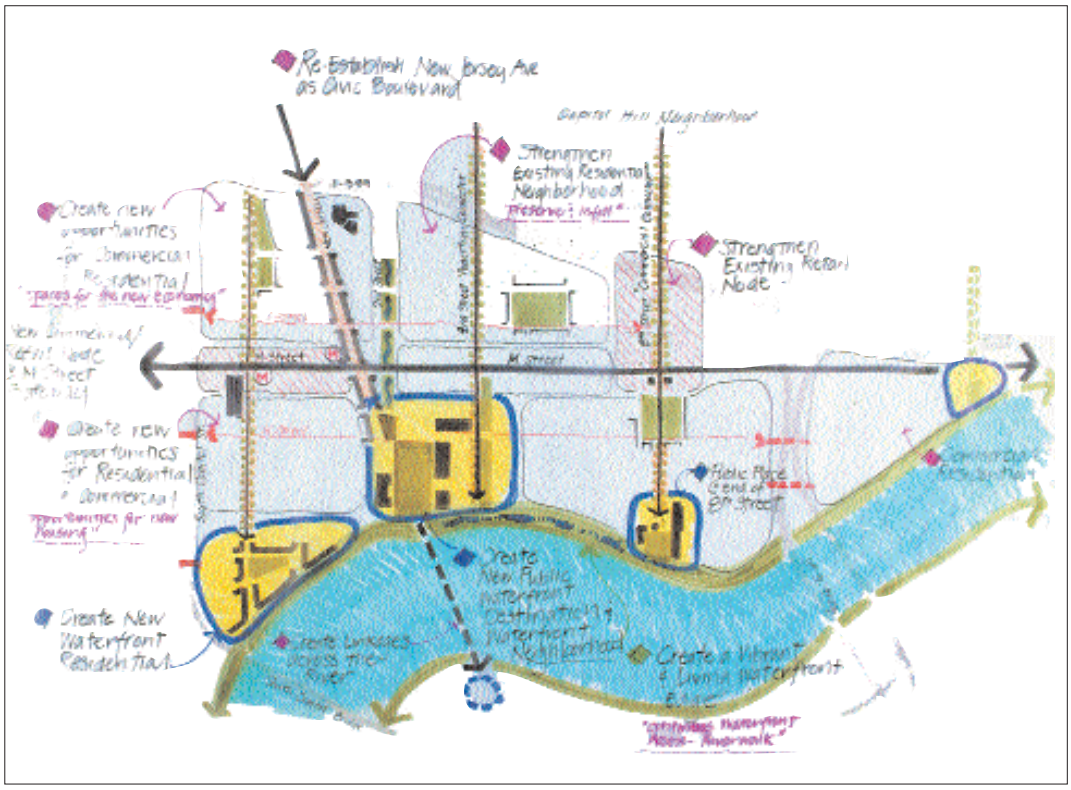


Diagram of a "civic framework" of streets, activity centers and open spaces , including public access along both sides and across the Anacostia River
Graphic: Thadani Hetzel Partnership

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 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."

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.

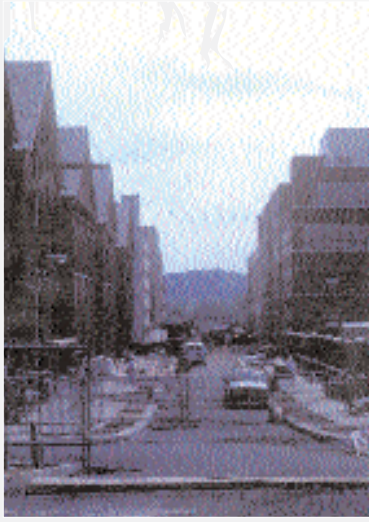
Ultimately, the charrette ratified the emerging concept of a mixed-use urban neighborhood—proposing "appropriately scaled" residential, public and commercial uses, including a park, museum, offices, shops and restaurants; various types and sizes of housing, affordable to a range of incomes; walkable 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

Interview: Rear Admiral Chris Weaver

Todd W. Bressi



Rear Admiral Chris Weaver is Commandant of Naval District Washington (NDW) and commander of the Washington Navy Yard, adjacent to the Southeast Federal Center. Since 1993, the Navy has been consolidating personnel on the base, renovating old structures and adding new buildings to accommodate some 5,000 additional people. Though the base is not expanding, military contractors are seeking space nearby, creating development pressure in the area. Weaver and John Imparato, NDW Director of Corporate Information Management, discussed the dynamics of operating an active military base in the middle of a city with Todd W. Bressi.

Clockwise from top left: Historic industrial building reused for offices; relocated employees will be located in new and rehabilitated structures; the Navy Museum, which seeks to expand
Photos: Todd W. Bressi

What are the challenges of operating a military base in an urban setting?

Weaver: The Navy Yard has been at this location since 1799. This area was considered to be the country then, and over the years the community grew up around us, so we feel a historic responsibility for connecting with it. In fact, many of the original Navy Yard workers settled nearby. Now that we find ourselves an administrative center—this has not been an industrial center since 1963—we see a chance to revitalize that connection with the community.

Of course, as much as you want to be seamless with the city, often you're not. Infrastructure within the base is administered under one system; infrastructure outside is administered by the city. On the other hand, the day when an installation can sit in isolation behind a fence are gone. We are too interconnected by information and transportation.

So if we double the Navy Yard work force, but do nothing about roads or utilities outside, we have a mismatch that people in community pay for. If retail and support services aren't readily nearby in a neighborhood that is perceived to be safe and attractive, then not only are people inside the yard dissatisfied, but the community is also missing an opportunity for economic growth.

That means the first challenge, as we saw our growth coming, was to connect with the city of Washington, and to other organizations, and do joint planning, briefing mayors, briefing managers and getting their perspective on where our growth should occur.

How do you interact with the community?

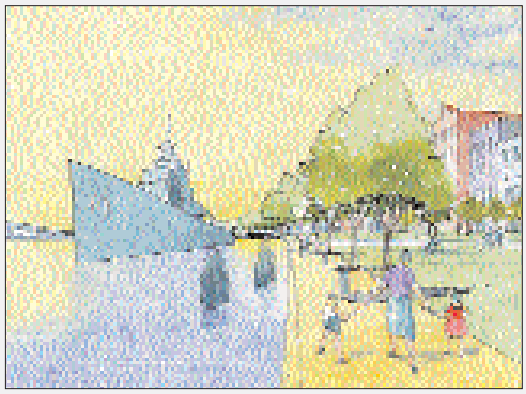
Weaver: We have a standard information sheet for developers and business people who inquire about what is happening here. My staff and I go to meetings of local business and community groups, to let them know about the growth of the Navy Yard and the kinds of things we think would contribute to a high quality workplace. Then we let the marketplace take over. The results have been gratifying: Three major developers are now building structures outside the gate, several new businesses have opened on Eighth Street; a number of restaurants have taken hold.

We also have a program called Bridges to Friendship, which leverages the Navy relocations and office development into economic growth, training and jobs for local residents. By networking and sharing information with local organizations, all of us can be more effective at achieving our goals.

And we work with the schools. A lot of the people here are teaching in the community. We will have two classrooms for fifth graders, from sixteen different schools, coming in for science classes here on the base. We fund it, but the children benefit.

One of the issues raised at the charrette was access through the Navy Yard to the Anacostia River. How do you balance public access with your security needs?

Weaver: Anyone with a valid picture identification can come onto our base. We have 400,000 visitors a year to see our museum and other facilities. Although people aren't dis-



Left: Eighth Street, leading to the Navy Yard's main gate
Right: Riverfront promenade in the Navy Yard
Graphics: Thadani Hetzel Partnership

suaded from coming on base, many think this is a closed cantonment and stay away.

Our component of the Riverwalk, which will run along the Anacostia River to the District-Maryland line, is complete, meeting National Capitol Planning Commission standards. Since most of our important buildings will have enclave security, we will be able to have the Riverwalk open during the day and close it only at night. That is going to require a change from how we have looked at security in the past.

What is "enclave security"?

Perimeter security, the traditional method, means you stay on your side of the wall and we stay on ours. With enclave security, you still have security checks at entry points to the base, but that isn't your final line of security; the final line is the building itself.

We have a changing security posture. People will see us flexing our security procedures from time to time, and that will hopefully dissuade them from thinking they are going to be able to introduce some device into the yard. Of course, they don't have to come inside to attain their political objective, but within our precinct, I believe we are taking the best posture.

Admiral Vernon Clark, Chief of Naval Operations, said recently there is no absolute iron-clad guarantee you're going to be safe at all times in this work. That is partly because this is an open society, partly because the city now surrounds our yard. There's no way you can be protected from every attack. You have to keep that in mind as you write security procedures.

What other partnerships have you entered with the city?

We're using our contracting abilities to help the city's public works department with the reconstruction of M Street, which runs along the northern edge of the base. The city is working on improvements to its contracting process, and as that happens, we're providing a mechanism for doing the project in a timely way. The city gave us money for the design work, we hired the architect and engineer, and got a totally new design in ninety days. We gave the design back to city, and now that several phases of the reconstruction are nearing completion, they want to give us the money to oversee the rest of the project.

With the influx of workers, are you planning more shopping and services on base?

There are some restrictions on our ability to do that; some are imposed by Navy, some result from us trying to be good neighbor. We have to provide services, but we don't want to give the appearance that we are creating government services that will dissuade outside enterprise. I think you'll find this is not a written policy, but that commanders who are sensitive to the political and economic interfaces understand that it's not good installation policy to try to steamroll the community. You need to work with community to see how we both can benefit by working toward same goal.

This is about creating a high quality of service for the people who work for the Navy, which is defined by quality of life and quality of workplace, and is related to the quality and readiness of our forces. If we can make our workplace attractive, efficient and supportive of the human capacity we have, our employees are going to be more productive. And if we accomplish that in the context of helping a part of our community that has been left behind, what better circumstance can we ask for?

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

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.

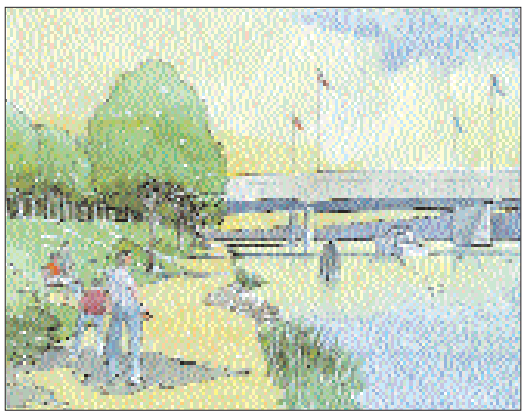
New Roles for GSA

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



Above: Proposal for renovating public housing near the Southeast Federal Center

Right: Proposal for extension of riverfront walkway beyond the Eleventh Street Bridge

Graphics: Thadani Hetzel Partnership

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 (a contract for an Anacostia waterfront master plan was awarded this winter), 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. 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.

This Field Report is produced by the Design History Foundation for the U.S. General Services Administration, Center for Urban Development. For more information, contact:

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