

---

---

**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD  
REVIEW OF SMALL-AREA PLAN**

---

---

Landmark/District: **Walter Reed Army Medical Center** (x) Agenda  
Address: **6900 Georgia Avenue, NW**

Meeting Date: **September 27, 2012**  
Staff Reviewer: **Tim Dennee**

---

---

The Government of the District of Columbia requests the Board's and the public's comment on a draft small-area plan for the redevelopment of most of the campus of the Walter Reed Army Medical Center. The plan has been released for a 30-day public comment period. Such a plan is not developed to a level of specificity for a Board action on any concept or permit applications that might follow from it. Rather, the purpose of this review is to familiarize the Board with the plan and with the campus itself in order to solicit comments and to anticipate any potential issues for future project reviews.

Copies of the plan have been enclosed for the Board's review, and the entire 143-page text and related documents are available at:  
<http://planning.dc.gov/DC/Planning/In+Your+Neighborhood/Wards/Ward+4/Small+Area+Plans+&+Studies/Walter+Reed+Army+Medical+Center+Small+Area+DRAFT+Plan+Released+for+Public+Comment>.

The draft plan consists of background, drawings, broad design principles, and information on transportation, sustainability strategies, etc. The master plan proposes new construction, some demolition of contributing and non-contributing structures, the further opening-up of the campus, landscaping, and the construction and widening of streets and paths. It contemplates a variety of uses for the site, including retail, office, educational/institutional, and residential.

### **Background**

Walter Reed Army Medical Center, consisting of little more than the core of today's Building 1, opened in 1909. It was intended ultimately to combine on a single campus an Army general hospital, the Army Medical School, the Army Medical Museum, and the Surgeon General's Library, in addition to pathology research facilities. The central hospital function grew rapidly with the coming of the World Wars, but it was not until the mid 1950s that most of these functions had been united on the installation. It is this period, 1909 to 1957, that the Army has recommended as the medical center's period of significance.

In accordance with the recommendations of the 2005 Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission report, Walter Reed Army Medical Center was closed a year ago, with most of its functions moved to Bethesda. The Army made the 110-acre campus available to other federal

agencies, of whom only the Department of State responded with an interest in the transfer of about 43 acres of the west side for redevelopment as foreign chanceries. When not being transferred to another federal agency, military property may be transferred as surplus to a Local Redevelopment Authority (LRA) established by a state and local government. The LRA has the responsibility to design a comprehensive plan for the reuse of the property. The potential impacts of its plan are among the factors considered in the military's National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis. In this case, the Government of the District of Columbia expressed an interest in taking title to the remaining 67 acres. A reuse plan was approved by City Council and submitted to the Army this spring.

The draft small area plan continues the public process begun for the reuse plan, adding more detail and guidelines for development and setting the groundwork for the further parcelization and zoning of the campus.

The negotiations between the Army and the LRA and the Department of State have not concluded, but in anticipation of the transfer of most of the campus to the District, the Army has conducted a public consultation in accordance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. The act requires federal agencies to avoid, minimize and/or mitigate, as feasible, any adverse effects of their undertakings upon historic properties. In this case, the installation has been determined eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, and the adverse effects would include the transfer of much of the property from federal stewardship and the division of the property which is likely to result in effects such as physical barriers across the campus.

In the 106 consultation, the Army has been working on how best to transfer to the LRA and its successors the kind of preservation responsibilities that federal agencies have. The consulting parties have concluded that the simplest approach would be a Programmatic Agreement (PA) that would require the Army to request designation of the eligible historic district, so that it would come under the jurisdiction of the District's historic preservation statute. The historic district nomination would include as contributing resources most of the pre-1958 buildings, a few interior spaces (such as the lobbies of Buildings 1 and 40 and Building 1's Pershing Suite), some landscape features, and potential archaeological resources. Toward this end, the Army would conduct some archaeological investigations and also provide mitigation in the form of interpretive signage. The conclusion of the PA is imminent, and it is expected that the historic district nomination would be before the Board within the next twelve months.

The transfer of a large parcel to another federal agency such as the State Department does not, in itself, constitute an adverse effect, but it is anticipated that State will propose some demolition and alteration of historic buildings, as well as security fencing at the boundary of the two parcels and within theirs. Such adverse effects will be the subject of a separate consultation or consultations. State is presently working on its own master plan to minimize such effects while accommodating the proposed embassy uses.

### **The Small Area Plan**

The draft small area plan calls for a combination of adaptive reuse of existing historic and "non-contributing" buildings, the replacement of several buildings with new construction, and some

infill development (see page 4 for an overview map). The biggest change to the present map would be the demolition of Building 2, the huge Heaton Pavilion, which had become the main hospital building. A non-contributing early 1970s structure, it is so large that all of the new development proposed would not equal its area. The parking garage beneath it would be retained or reconstructed to serve new uses. The removal of Building 2 and the use of its present front lawn for new construction opens up great possibilities for redevelopment.

Planned uses would be mixed, with low-rise (four stories) housing at the north edge of the campus, facing existing residential across Fern Street; larger mixed retail/office and retail/multi-family in the area now occupied by Building 2 and somewhat smaller commercial and mixed-use buildings along the Georgia Avenue frontage. The buildings in the southern portion of the District parcel would largely be adapted to educational, institutional and housing uses, with some infill construction, at the south edge of the campus, at the corners at center. The principal historic landscape—the great lawn and rose garden south of Building 1—would be maintained and become the main passive recreation space for this new neighborhood.

The physical organization of Walter Reed is distinct from some other campuses, such as Saint Elizabeths East Campus, whose small area plan the Board reviewed earlier this year. Whereas the buildings at Saint Elizabeths generally face outward and parallel to the nearest exterior street or boundary, the principal orientation at Walter Reed is set by Building 1's southern orientation and the axes that run through this central building. The other buildings tend to face it, with those along Georgia Avenue oriented inward rather than out of the campus. Historically, this divided the medical center into roughly three areas: the crest of the ridge on which Building 1 and its neighbors sit; the below-the-hill utility and support area; and the land behind (north of) Building 1, which was an expansion area frequently occupied by barracks-like wards, but later by the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology and, ultimately, the huge Building 2. The distinctions between these character areas are perceptible today, and they are reflected in the plan in a similar division of uses and bulk in the east-west "sub-area" bands (see pages 74-117). With the exception of the treatment of major entrances, the installation's growth tended to de-emphasize the importance of the campus in favor of the core.

One of the principal aims of the small area plan is to better connect Walter Reed to the surrounding neighborhoods and to connect points within the campus itself. This will be more of a challenge if the State Department parcel is ultimately fenced off, but it is important to retain and enhance the existing street grid throughout. Some of the interior streets will be extended creating more continuity with the city grid when new perimeter entrances are created (see page 68, for instance). The plan would strengthen the north-south axis through Building 1 by the extension of 13<sup>th</sup> Street, as a kind of boulevard, from the north boundary to Building 1's north entrance pavilion. It would also strengthen the Georgia Avenue frontage with new construction oriented to the street and punctuated by pivotal green spaces.

### **Preservation Issues**

The following are points that ought to be emphasized in its final text and its implementation. As it is expected that the entire campus will ultimately be designated, the Board can expect that instances of new construction, additions, demolitions, and some alterations will come before it in the future.

### Road improvements

Although resulting in significant change to the map of the campus, most of the proposed road improvements would simply be southward and westward expansions of existing roads, mostly with little impact on historic resources. But the precise alignment and width of each will have to be carefully studied in relation to the surrounding buildings and their yards.

The most challenging would be changes to Main Drive, especially in front of Building 1. The principal east-west route across the campus, this road dates to the installation's earliest years and includes two roundabouts created largely for memorial purposes (one of these holds the fountain in front of Building 1, and the other, the bust of Walter Reed). If the road were to be widened appreciably, it would either eat into the front yard of Building 1 or into the basin-like great lawn to the south. Either might distort the roundabout, and the latter option would require a retaining wall on the downhill side.

While the road alignments are generally compatible with the site's character, the specifics of the road widenings will be referred to the Board when developed.

- If there is to be widening anywhere on Main Drive, it should be minimized or avoided altogether near Building 1.
- Similar care should be shown for any new "multi-use" trail through the principal historic landscape, the World War I-era great lawn/rose garden (see page 103).

### Demolition

In order to open up the campus to the rest of the city, much of the perimeter fence would be removed from the District-owned parcel. Much of this fencing postdates the period of significance, but many fence panels and piers are considered historic. In the short term, the fence will be retained for security purposes, but when redevelopment of the northern tier of the parcel gets under way, the fence there is likely to be removed completely, for a better relationship of the retail to Georgia Avenue. In contrast, the perimeter fencing on the State Department side—most of which is historic—would be retained as a security barrier for the chanceries.

- While it is reasonable and perhaps necessary to remove much of the east fencing, it is important to retain the gate piers at the major entries to mark the historic boundary of the installation.

The plan also indicates that a number of the rear additions to Building 1 would be removed. As many of these are late—often postdating the period of significance—it seems reasonable in order to rationalize the building's plan, restore light courts, and restore the symmetry of the north side and the prominence of its entrance pavilion. Of course, as the earliest and most important building at Walter Reed, Building 1 deserves the greatest care.

Although it is not highlighted in the text (and they merely disappear from the maps of proposed conditions, as on page 67), the plan proposes the demolition of two contributing buildings so that

new buildings can be erected on their sites. These are Building 38, the former guardhouse located to the northeast of Building 1, and Building 83, at the center of the south edge of the campus, and which housed animals used in medical research.

- Demolition of Buildings 38 and 83 would be contrary to the purposes of the preservation law and would require the approval of each project of special merit to replace them. As such demolitions are dependent upon the specifics of the project and will not be likely be proposed in the initial phases of development, the Board and the Mayor's Agent will later have a better opportunity to evaluate the success of the redevelopment and the necessity for such actions.

#### Additions and rehabilitation

At this point, nothing specific is proposed regarding additions to contributing buildings. Additions to historic buildings will, of course, have to meet the preservation law's compatibility standard. Happily, the initial phase of redevelopment will involve the reuse—and presumably the rehabilitation—of some of the historic buildings in the southern tier of the campus.

#### New construction

New construction will have to meet the “not incompatible” standard of the preservation law, but where most of it will occur, there is less historic fabric providing a context. The demolition of Building 2 can open up a lot of volume for redevelopment while improving the setting of Building 1. Again, the net square footage of the campus buildings would actually decrease with the demolition of Building 2 but replacement buildings will have to be sufficiently compatible in terms of quality, massing and materials and not encroach or loom over Building 1, especially as seen from the south.

One of the concerns most commonly expressed at the public meetings during the development of the small area plan regarded the size and nature of the buildings proposed for the southeast and southwest corners of the campus—and especially the southwest. Illustrated as blocks at this point, the buildings have the potential to make a positive visual statement or to loom over or encroach upon historic Buildings 8, 9, 90 and 11.

Although the exact site plan is not set, the production of townhouses at the north end of campus will probably be a pretty straightforward proposition. Yet, at a proposed four stories, they could have unfortunate proportions if not carefully designed.

- Under the preservation law, the compatibility of the projects at the southeast and southwest corners of the campus with the campus context would be the most important factor for the Board's consideration, rather than consistency with the streetscapes beyond the campus.
- Similar care must be shown in the design of Buildings M, N, Q, R and S to leave sufficient breathing room around, and to avoid overshadowing, the historic Buildings 1 and 7.

- It should be encouraged that any proposals for four-story townhouses render the top floor as a well-proportioned attic story.
- Fences, walls and other barriers and enclosures throughout the campus should be discouraged, to retain the feeling of the historic unity and connectivity of the place.