

# What to Do With RFK?

## Too Small for A New Stadium

Monte Edwards

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The 190 acres that comprise the RFK campus include the massive parking lots to the north and south of the stadium, the soccer practice fields, RFK itself and the DC Armory. All these facilities are District owned. The land underneath, however, is not. The entire campus is National Park land leased to the District by the federal government under a 1986 agreement that expires in 2036. At that time, the land will revert to NPS jurisdiction unless there is Congressional action.

The federal lease restricts usage on the RFK campus to recreational facilities, open space, public outdoor recreation opportunities and other uses as approved by the National Park Service (NPS). NPS is guided in its decisions by the Comprehensive Plan for federally owned parks and open space developed by the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC).

So, the term and constraints of the existing federal lease make it difficult for either the city or a private entity to make a large investment in a new stadium. Rebuilding RFK for a football team would require both the cooperation of NPS, NCPC and possible Congressional action. Even if all these stars aligned by some miracle, the physical constraints of the site still make it impossible.

A Question of Space

Thirty years ago, the District explored how to upgrade RFK so the Redskins would continue to play in the City. In 1988, Mayor Sharon Pratt Kelly proposed building a new facility adjacent to the

existing stadium. They planned to use Kingman and Heritage Islands for another 40 acres of surface parking. In their search for space, they even considered paving the Langston Golf Course. Due to the opposition of then Secretary of the Interior, the expansion of the parking lots was later dropped.

In 1993, the question became moot when Redskins owner Jack Kent Cooke pledged to build his stadium in Maryland. In Aug. 1997, FedExField opened in Landover, Maryland. This new facility can accommodate as many as 91,000 fans in contrast with the old RFK's 56,000 capacity.

In 2010, Congress permanently transferred Kingman and Heritage Islands to the District under the terms of the Anacostia Waterfront Framework Plan of 2003. The city has since constructed pedestrian trails and the wooden footbridges connecting Kingman and Heritage Islands to the Anacostia's western shore converting them into a popular nature preserve. Further protecting the natural settings is the new zoning of the islands as W-0, that encourages park, open space and waterfront-enhancing uses, with vehicular parking prohibited, except for handicap spaces.

The transformation of Heritage and Kingman Islands into parkland considerably complicates any future return of the Redskins. Modern stadiums require acres of surface parking to accommodate the tailgating demands of fans. The RFK campus no longer has sufficient space to accommodate these needs and an enlarged stadium.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Given the fact that the RFK campus is not large enough to accommodate the return of the Redskins, perhaps it is time to consider its redevelopment in a manner consistent with policies of the Parks and Open Space section of the federal elements of the current (2004) Comprehensive Plan . The document embraces the following imperatives:

- “Protect, restore, and enhance the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers as great open space resources and as recreational amenities, including shorelines and waterfront areas along rivers.”
- “Improve the quality of water in the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers to allow for both restored natural habitats and increased recreational use.”
- “Retain shoreline areas in their natural condition or appropriately landscape the water’s edge.”
- “Manage all lands along the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers in a manner that encourages the enjoyment and recreational use of water resources, while protecting the scenic and ecological values of the waterways.”
- “Encourage swimming, boating, and fishing facilities, as well as water-oriented tourist activities, on the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers.”
- “Ensure that the shorelines and waterfronts of the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers remain mostly publicly owned and that privately owned parks provide shoreline continuity through parks and promenades.”
- “Discourage large paved parking areas and other non-water-related development along the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers. Where large paved areas are required, preference should be given to using pervious surfaces. Existing large parking areas, such as the Pentagon’s north parking lot along Boundary Channel [and the parking lots at RFK], should be removed as soon as feasible and restored to a landscaped condition with active or passive recreational uses.”

These mandates dovetail nicely with DC’s Anacostia Waterfront Framework Plan, the Anacostia Waterfront Trust and NCPC’s own plans that govern NPS’s policies in the National Capitol Region. Given the time constraints of the city’s federal lease for the RFK campus, the easiest approach is to redevelop the RFK campus in a

manner consistent with the Comprehensive Plan, the existing federal lease and DC and NCPC's guidelines into an urban park. Creating this new oasis of green space on the shores of the Anacostia is sure to enlist the support of neighboring jurisdictions, NPS and NCPC. Moreover, as witnessed in recent community meetings, it is the clear choice of the site's neighbors.

The fiction of the Redskins return should not be allowed to stand in the way of transformation of the RFK Campus into such a recreational and ecological amenity.

*The article was prepared by Monte Edwards, Chair of The Capitol Hill Restoration Society (CHRS) City Planning Committee. Since its founding in 1955, CHRS has worked continuously to make Capitol Hill the desirable location it has now become. Today, that legacy of standing up for the community continues with our work in planning, zoning, historic preservation, and public safety. CHRS is a volunteer organization, made up of Hill residents who love their historic neighborhoods and want to ensure that the unique character of the Hill is around for future generations.*