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Opinion Just stop building on the National Mall

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Our country has many great histories, cultures and communities. And it is important to honor them – but not on the National Mall.

The Mall is a symbolic landscape – first conceived by Pierre L'Enfant in the 18th century, and revised and extended under the McMillan Plan developed by the Senate Park Commission more than a century later. The commission, which included landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., viewed the Mall as the capital's green core, to be framed by great trees and punctuated, but not filled, with architecture. It was to be a gathering space for all people – an open greensward, connecting the Capitol to the Washington Monument.

The Smithsonian's plans for two museums would fence in this democratic space, increase urban density, destroy sightlines, intrude on the water table and obstruct connectivity. More buildings would add acres of hard surface and shade, damaging thriving green space, critical in a time of climate change. Both proposed sites would fall within “the no-build zone” that Congress established two decades ago to preserve the Mall's open beauty and prevent overdevelopment.

Congress was right then and remains right. Stop! There are fine alternative sites for the museums that would not crowd this historic and natural asset. Smithsonian leaders need to pursue other locations, and Congress needs to repeat: No more development on the National Mall.

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