



VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL FUND

**Testimony of Harry G. Robinson, III
Before the Subcommittee on National Parks
Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Dec. 3, 2009**

Mr. Chairman, members of the subcommittee - good afternoon. My name is Harry Robinson. I am a trained architect and city planner, currently serving as professor of urban design and dean emeritus of Howard University. I am also the principal of my own international design firm, TRG Consulting.

I am here today to talk about the Education Center at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and I offer a unique perspective. Twice I was appointed by the president to serve on the Commission of Fine Arts - one of the organizations you will be hearing about today. In fact, I was CFA's chairman. I am also a long-time member of the board of directors of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, the group that is working with the National Park Service to build the Education Center. I am myself a Vietnam veteran, having served in the U.S. Army from 1966-68, including a tour of duty in Vietnam, where I received the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart.

I stand before you today, wearing all of these hats, to ask that you support HR 3689 to extend the authorization deadline for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Education Center for four years — from 2010 to 2014.

You are probably wondering why this project needs an extension. I'd like to give you some background.

In November 2003, Congress passed legislation, subsequently signed by the president, authorizing that a visitors' center be built "at or near" the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The Memorial Fund started working on the project immediately. By February 2004, we had commissioned a site study and environmental analysis to determine the most suitable site for the center. The survey evaluated visitor circulation, vegetation, vistas, historic landmarks, sound and visual activity, as well as pedestrian and traffic counts. In short, every possible way that the visitor center would affect the area around it was evaluated.

And we chose people who care deeply about the National Mall to conduct this study: JC Cummings, the architect of record for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial; as well as Henry Arnold and George Dickie, who designed Constitution Gardens, where the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is located. We were confident that this team would not recommend a

site that was in any way detrimental to the National Mall — and, indeed, that was one of our original stipulations in choosing a site.

The Memorial Fund also held a national design contest to choose an architect and exhibit designer. We formed an Advisory Board to give us recommendations about displays. We chose a broad range of Americans for this committee: veterans, former military leaders, authors, journalists, educators and sociologists who could guide us in the best way to tell the story of the Vietnam War in this center.

We also began meeting with the federal commissions responsible for overseeing any new structures built on the National Mall. This is where the delays began. Once the results of our site survey were completed, we presented the results, along with our recommendation, to the National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission. After the first meeting, which was held in March 2005, the Commission asked for further study of three sites. After the second meeting the following May, the Commission gave approval to two sites: the site on Henry Bacon Drive for which we ultimately won approval, and a site within the Department of Interior South building.

CFA approved the Henry Bacon Drive site at a September 2005 meeting “subject to conditions of architectural development.” While the Memorial Fund and the National Park Service had reasonable expectations that NCPC would follow suit, instead, it deadlocked on every vote on the subject after lengthy debate during an October 2005 meeting. In the end, NCPC asked for further study of the front lawn of the Interior South Building, even though the Secretary of the Interior had removed this building from consideration the previous June. In addition, they asked for further study of one other site and “program information” for the preferred site. In other words, although site approval had not been given, NCPC was asking the Memorial Fund to provide design details for the building it wanted to place there — a building that could not be designed until the final location was known.

While the Memorial Fund and the National Park Service prepared to make a presentation to NCPC at its December 2005 meeting, we were shocked to find that the Education Center had been stricken from the agenda, with the Commission saying it wanted an environmental study completed before it would consider the site favored by the Memorial Fund.

So, working in good faith with NCPC, the Memorial Fund hired an engineering firm to conduct a thorough environmental study on two sites at or near the Memorial to comply with the request. The study took several months to complete and cost \$80,000.

In the end, it nearly took an act of Congress to get site approval for the Education Center. In spite of the fact that the Memorial Fund and National Park Service had submitted to every request of every federal commission they met with, there was no progress. In March 2006, the House passed a measure that would end the delays in site approval by a wide margin, and the Senate began considering the measure the following May. It was only then that NCPC was moved to grant site approval in August 2006—nearly three

years after Congress had approved the idea of a visitor center, and nearly a year and a half from the time that the Memorial Fund first met with the federal commissions.

All of that time and money spent — and it was just for site approval.

The complex work began with the design process. Congress mandated that the structure be built “underground.” And indeed, everyone involved with this project, including the Memorial Fund and National Park Service, have been sensitive to preserving the historic vistas near that end of the National Mall. On the other hand, we also need to ensure that our visitors — especially the disabled, and veterans who may have PTSD issues, feel comfortable and safe in the visitor center environment.

We are fortunate to have on our team one of the world’s leading architectural firms, Polshek Partnership Architects. These award-winning architects, led by Jim Polshek, have designed a number of nationally celebrated buildings, as well as some highly successful underground spaces. In Polshek’s capable hands, the daunting challenge of an underground visitor center was managed with innovation and creativity.

To be sure, we still had differences to work out with the federal commissions. But, during meetings with both CFA and NCPC, commissioners were complimentary of the efforts of Jim Polshek and his team, noting that if any architect could take a set of almost impossible conditions and make them work, it was Polshek.

In August 2006, CFA and NCPC jointly issued a set of 15 design guidelines for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Education Center. While these were guidelines and not binding requirements, the Memorial Fund and National Park Service took these suggestions seriously and worked to incorporate as many as possible into the subsequent building plans.

By the spring of 2007, our architects had developed three different plans for how an underground center could be achieved. We took these plans to CFA and NCPC in informal meetings to get their feedback, so we would know how we should proceed. We worked in good faith with these commissions every step of the way, and this good faith work paid off. CFA gave us design concept approval in October 2007 and NCPC, while it does not vote for concept approval, indicated that the design should move forward.

We continue to work with CFA and NCPC to refine our design of the visitor center and work through the approval process. We conducted informational and formal presentations of our latest design earlier this year, receiving feedback from both groups and acting on those recommendations. I should note that the changes the Memorial Fund has been willing to make have been significant, including reducing the size of the structure, removing skylights, redirecting walkways and reorienting the building on the site. At every meeting, we have proven our willingness to listen and accept the commissioners’ advice. Informal meetings with the commissioners have shown us we are on track and moving forward.

I think everyone involved with this project has been relieved that the delays and disagreements of the site approval phase have not resurfaced during the design approval phase. However, it cannot be ignored that site approval ate up hundreds of thousands of dollars and years of effort that could have been better used later.

This committee, quite appropriately, needs to know why we are asking for an extension, and here is one answer: our good faith efforts to meet the unprecedented demands of the federal commissions have cost us time and money that we need to recoup.

There's another reason: we are in the middle of the worst economy our nation has experienced in decades. I don't have to tell any of you the challenges that every American is facing — from the family trying to make ends meet to the corporation trying to survive in tough times. All of this affects nonprofit organizations, like the Memorial Fund, as we try to raise money for our various programs. The economy has affected our fundraising for the center as well.

But in the midst of all of this, there is good news to report. In spite of the economy, people believe in this project enough to put their money behind it. We have raised more than \$3.5 million in 2009 alone. This included a \$2.5 million pledge that is not only the largest individual pledge the center has received, but also the largest individual donation the Memorial Fund itself has ever received. These pledges have reinvigorated our fundraising efforts. We have raised nearly \$25 million in donations and in-kind gifts, and we estimate it will take \$85 million in total to build the center.

Momentum for this project is also building because of our new campaign chairman, San Antonio Spurs owner Peter M. Holt, who has actively pushed the movement forward on all fronts. He is joined by a robust leadership team that includes seven governors, from Texas, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Louisiana, Florida, Georgia and New Mexico, who have pledged to gather support for the center in their states. The AFL-CIO, and its Building and Construction Trades Department, have endorsed the project - and many veterans' organizations are behind us as well. In fact, VFW pledged \$1 million. We feel that this is a good indication of how much support we have from all facets of the American public.

When Congress passed the bill authorizing the Education Center in 2003, you approved the final language unanimously in both the House and the Senate. We took that as overwhelming evidence that Congress wants this important learning facility built, so future generations can remember and honor the sacrifices of those who served in Vietnam. The Education Center was conceived as a way to help put faces to the thousands of names on The Wall, to educate future generations about these honorable men and women who gave everything for their country and to give a glimpse into their lives. Help us keep the momentum going by giving us more time. We respectfully ask you to approve HR 3689 at the committee level, and ask for your help to provide for its consideration on the floor of the Senate.

Thank you.