

Real Divided Plaza Is in Prospect for Wider Virginia Ave.

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The National Capital Planning Commission staff has released its recommendation for sprucing up a widened Virginia Ave. and creating a "divided plaza" where it intersects with New Hampshire Ave.

The oval plaza will probably be paved as it sits atop the sunken West Leg of the Inner Loop Freeway and no trees would grow on it.

It is close to the also sunken E Street Expressway and the Rock Creek Parkway and between the far-flung access ramps to the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge and the Whitehurst Freeway—a dense and wormy system of concrete ribbons that will enmesh the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

This system was, of course, designed by the Highway Department before the location of the Kennedy Center was decided on.

The Planning Commission was roused to action when the Highway Department requested that Virginia Avenue also be widened, since, according to the report, its traffic will increase "as the new highway links are completed and feed more cars into the Avenue."

The planners' laudable proposal is now mainly reduced to the planting of new trees and other greenery around the badly carved up area. The effort can best be described

as sprinkling parsley on a bowl of spaghetti.

The proposal was approved by the Commission a year ago. It took all this time to get the drawings and explanations printed for public release today. The publication is to be the first of a series of NCPC "special street studies."

"It is only a minimum beginning of what ought to be done," said NCPC urban designer Donald E. Jackson somewhat apologetically.

Oval's Future Up in Air

The divided plaza carries Virginia Avenue straight through its center and divides New Hampshire Avenue into circular roadways. The resulting oval in the middle is to be paved or raised or sunken or somehow defigured. There might also be a monument or a fountain—designer Jackson isn't quite sure what.

Until that's decided, they'll probably plant grass.

To the north of the plaza the NCPC recommends a building of some kind that would make use of the air rights over the Freeway. But the building, it says, should be spliced in the middle so we can see the Cathedral on Mt. Albans. Just how inclined a developer might be to sacrifice rentable space for this purpose, the NCPC proposal does not venture to guess.

To the south of the plaza

there is to be a pedestrian overlook over the Freeway, the Arlington hills, the Memorial Bridge and the Kennedy Center. There are to be benches and potted trees.

Special Service Road

To the west is the Watergate Development, the first unit of which is now under construction. The curved structure faces the Howard Johnson Motel across the street. Its access will require a special two lane service road, in addition to the six-lane Virginia ave. That will leave eight feet for a pedestrian sidewalk and the promised potted planting.

There is also to be a walkway from the plaza to the Kennedy Center, winding along the Freeway. Here we are on firm ground for trees to grow out of.

The plan further includes the area between the new Pan American Health Organization building and the State Department, now divided by the E Street Expressway canyon. There are to be pedestrian bridges and crossings with more potted trees and hedges.

The proposal, the NCPC report points out, is all in the spirit of L'Enfant who wanted us to have "a greater variety of pleasant seats and prospects" along his avenues.

Except that the report, accidentally, no doubt, omits L'Enfant's name from this quotation.