



Trump's reflecting pool spruce-up fails to charm preservationists

The president ordered the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool to be coated with a blue liner.



Work is being done on the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool on Tuesday in Washington. | Rylan DiGiacomo-Rapp/POLITICO's E&E News

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Construction workers in yellow and orange milled about the drained Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool on Tuesday morning, where a rectangular patch of brilliant blue signaled President Donald Trump's latest effort to remake the nation's capital.

Trump last week announced that the reflecting pool — the granite foreground for Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech — would be coated with a commercial-grade liner in a color dubbed "American Flag Blue." The painted-on material, commonly used in swimming pools, is intended as a lower-cost alternative to major repairs aimed at stopping long-standing leaks.

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The decision comes as the Trump administration prepares for the nation's 250th anniversary, planning fireworks and large-scale celebrations on the National Mall. But the move has drawn critical reactions from historic preservation experts, who question both the aesthetic choice and the administration's penchant for bypassing federal laws and procedures that are intended to preserve the look of the nation's capital.

"The reflecting pool is hallowed ground," said Charles Birnbaum, who previously served as the coordinator of the National Park Service's Historic Landscape Initiative, which aimed to identify and preserve historic landscapes across the national park system. "It shouldn't resemble a swimming pool."

Anna Leijon-Guth, a tourist from New Hampshire who sketched the Washington Monument visible beyond the pool Tuesday morning from the Lincoln Memorial, said

she was puzzled by the president's rationale.

"You're wasting your money on making a pool look a little bit bluer?" she said. "The pool's supposed to reflect the sky, take on the hue that is off the sky. That's what the reflection pool is all about."

Trump [touted the project](#) Thursday: "It will look far more beautiful than it did in 1922."

He said he hired contractors that have worked for him in the past on swimming pools to save money and get the job done faster.

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That was in lieu of proposals considered by the NPS that would cost upward of \$300 million and involve the removal and repair of the historic granite body of the pool, which has historically suffered leaks, Trump said.

"It was filthy dirty, and it leaked like a sieve," he said Thursday, quoting the new project's price tag at \$1.5 million.

But the overhaul of the century-old pool is also part of a broader push by the president to leave his signature style on the nation's capital, with limited input from preservationists or other federal agencies. That effort most notably included razing the East Wing of the White House last year to make room for a proposed 90,000-square-foot ballroom.

The president's vision includes plans to build a 250-foot triumphal arch in a traffic circle towering over the Lincoln Memorial from across the Potomac River. He also wants to paint the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, covering in white a historic granite building that sits perpendicular to the White House.

Trump in his fiscal 2027 spending request has asked Congress for \$10 billion to fund these types of projects, arguing that the city, its parks, monuments and fountains have fallen into disrepair. That's an amount roughly five times his proposed budget for the entire national park system next year. Public lands face a roughly \$35 billion backlog in

maintenance and repairs.

Jordan Tannenbaum, the former acting chair of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, said the problem with Trump's restoration blitz is that he's directing resources based on his own personal feelings, when there is tremendous need for rehabilitation and improvements across the city if he would consult the boards, commissions and agencies that oversee those places and have expertise in architecture, landscapes and historic properties.

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"He's spending money on what he determines — he, the president — determines needs it and not consulting the preservationists," he said. Tannenbaum was removed from the council last year in a sweeping purge of its Democratic members.

The Interior Department on Tuesday defended the pool renovation as part of the president's effort to "restore and preserve America's most iconic landmarks."

"The light-blue base coat visible over the weekend is a standard step in the multi-layer process and serves as the foundation for the final finish," the agency explained in a statement, noting that the final color of "American Flag Blue" will reflect "the patriotic character of one of the nation's most recognizable memorials."

Interior said work should be completed by the end of May.

The last time that the NPS weighed renovating the reflecting pool was in 2009, when it collaborated with the city, National Capital Planning Commission and Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, a body that advises the president and Congress on complying with historic preservation law.

That multiyear process produced a detailed environmental review in 2009, which acknowledged that "pervasive water leakage and evaporation" had made operating the pool "exceptionally" expensive. The pool relies on treated municipal water and chemical

additives to control algae.

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The last renovations for the reflecting pool were completed in 2012.

Birnbaum, who is today the president and CEO of the Cultural Landscape Foundation, an education and advocacy nonprofit, said the White House should have consulted the Commission of Fine Arts, which holds public hearings. The project also should have been subject to a review under the National Historic Preservation Act, he said.

The law's Section 106 process requires that federal projects follow an "avoid, minimize and mitigate" framework. That means prioritizing the prevention of harm to historic sites before considering ways to reduce or offset impacts.

The process, and the legal requirements, are meant to leverage expertise in architecture, history and preservation to protect the city, Birnbaum said.

"The reason the nation's capital looks the way it does is because of these guardrails," he said. "It is a high level of care and stewardship, because it is a world-class city. We wouldn't ask these questions [about why the rules are important] if we were talking about the Champs-Élysées."

Trump has reshaped several key oversight bodies that could have a say in the reflecting pool project, including the fine arts commission, National Capital Planning Commission and Advisory Council on Historic Preservation by replacing members appointed by former President Joe Biden with his own picks.

The D.C. Historic Preservation Office did not comment by press time. Washington Mayor Muriel Bowser's office deferred comment to the NPS.

At the pool Tuesday morning, two women huddled underneath an umbrella patterned with watercolor images of Mount Rushmore in red, white and blue. They liked the idea of a bluer pool, arguing that added color would make it look deeper, though they declined to

be recorded.

Others were less enthusiastic. A man on a bike whizzed by and muttered, “They’re ruining it.”

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