

Kennedy Center Lawsuit FAQs

What is the Kennedy Center?

The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts opened in 1971 as the nation's living memorial to President John F. Kennedy. Located on the Potomac River in Washington, D.C., it serves as the United States' national cultural center for the performing arts, hosting thousands of performances each year including theater, dance, opera, orchestral music, and popular music events. Many performances are free. The Millennium stage offers free performances 365 days a year, reaching 180,000 visitors in-person with upwards of 50 million views for livestream performances. Its 130,000 square feet of public gardens and paths support year-round public use and civic gatherings. The Kennedy Center hosts 2 million visitors a year, 1.6 million ticket buyers, 1.4 million students served, over 2,200 performances and exhibits, over 400 free performances and events.

The architecture was designed by Edward Durell Stone, Sr. and landscape architecture by his son, Ed Stone, Jr., along with Lester Collins and Sasaki, Walker and Associates. Design for the Kennedy Center incorporates many of Stone's celebrated design elements, including a dramatic cantilevered roof supported by slender, gold-painted vertical columns—features that also appear in his design for the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi.

Why do preservation laws apply?

Elements of the Kennedy Center have been determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. That status triggers federal review requirements under the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) and the National Environmental Policy Act whenever federal agencies propose actions that may affect historic resources.

What does the lawsuit argue?

The lawsuit alleges that the Kennedy Center Board and Trump administration are attempting to advance plans to dismantle or substantially alter the Kennedy Center without completing the legally required consultation and review processes. First, Defendants must secure permission of Congress for extensive design changes. Second, federal law requires agencies to consult with preservation experts, affected organizations, and the public before taking actions that could harm the integrity of historic resources. The suit also alleges anticipatory demolition: that by altering key elements of the building before seeking permits, the Kennedy Center Board has committed a violation, the remedy for which is that the permitting agencies are to deny permits, funding, and other assistance to the entire project.

Why does this case matter?

Cultural heritage and architecture advocates say the case raises broader questions about whether longstanding federal laws protecting historic landmarks will be followed when the government proposes major changes to nationally significant civic architecture.

Why is this lawsuit being filed now?

The lawsuit follows recent public statements by President Trump suggesting the Kennedy Center could undergo a dramatic renovation that would strip the building down to its steel structure, leaving the steel “fully exposed.” According to reporting, the administration is considering a two-year closure and a project that could cost at least \$200 million. While officials say the effort is intended to address deferred maintenance and capital repairs funded by Congress last year, details about the scope of the proposed changes have not been publicly released. Preservation advocates say the possibility of such sweeping alterations—combined with limited public disclosure of the plans—makes it critical that federal agencies comply with the consultation and review processes required under the National Historic Preservation Act before any demolition or major reconstruction proceeds.

What happens next?

Plaintiffs will soon file a motion seeking a preliminary injunction and ask the court to hear it quickly given the speed with which the administration says it plans to alter the building.

How does this relate to the litigation over the attempted renaming of the complex the “Trump Kennedy Center?”

The cases have different plaintiffs, legal counsel, and key legal theories, but both suits allege that the administration is shortchanging preservation laws and are seeking injunctive relief.

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