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Independence National Historical Park

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People's Plaza Opens on Independence Mall

Philadelphia, PA – Darla Sidles, Acting Superintendent of Independence National Historical Park, today officially opened People's Plaza, an area on Independence Mall that provides a highly visible space for groups that choose to gather in the park for public assembly. Independence Mall has been undergoing major landscaping and construction for 10 years, and People's Plaza is one part of this project. Bill Moore, President and CEO of the Independence Visitor Center Corporation, has been managing the overall mall redevelopment project. Sidles and Moore said today that they hope to have a grand opening event for Independence Mall later this spring.

Philadelphia Mayor Nutter was proud to attend this event during the first weeks of his administration. Voicing his support for Independence National Historical Park and its role as a gathering place for all people, Nutter said, "We in Philadelphia sometimes take for granted the world-changing, historical events that took place just feet from where we are gathered today. I am so proud to serve as the Mayor of this great city. We must never forget the rights and obligations for citizens that were negotiated here in Independence Hall as well as those included in the Bill of Rights."

People's Plaza was funded by a donation from the Friends of Independence National Historical Park, a non-profit group that supports the park through membership activities, fundraising and volunteer efforts. Tom Caramanico, Chair of the Board of the Friends of Independence, joined the press conference to hand over the funds that will be used to cover the costs of People's Plaza. Presenting a big check in the amount of \$268,983 to the Independence Visitor Center Corporation, Caramanico said, "The Friends of Independence have been here since 1972 to help out the park in any way we can, and today I am proud that our efforts in support of the park resulted in the construction and opening of this wonderful plaza. It provides a beautiful reminder of how vital the Constitution is, over 220 years after it was signed here in Independence Hall, and the Friends of Independence are pleased to be part of this dedication."

People's Plaza features the First Amendment, and provides electricity and other needs for groups to use the space for public assembly. Independence National Historical Park receives over 300 requests each year for permits to hold public events or gatherings in the park. When park management considers permits to gather anywhere in the park, the park does not consider the message that the group will be sharing or the political affiliation of the group or individual submitting the permit application. The content of the message is protected under the First

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Amendment guarantee of freedom of speech. The park does review permit applications for their potential for possible resource damage and impact on visitor services. People's Plaza will provide a safe and particularly visible space for groups to use, just across the street from Independence Hall. As well as providing for the needs of groups that want to gather here, People's Plaza will stand as a symbol of the importance of the First Amendment and the historical role of Independence Hall in the development of the U.S. Constitution. "Whether groups are gathering here on this plaza, or anywhere else in the park," said Sidles, "this space will stand as a reminder of the ideals we all share."

Joseph Torsella, President and CEO of the National Constitution Center, joined Sidles, Nutter, Moore, and Caramanico to celebrate the opening of this area. In his comments, Torsella shared some of the ways the National Constitution Center teaches visitors about the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, including through special events such as the one being held later this evening at the National Constitution Center. Two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Anthony Lewis, one of the country's most esteemed experts on the First Amendment, will share his latest work on the importance of freedom of expression, *Freedom for the Thought That We Hate*, at 6:30 pm. Lewis will discuss how our First Amendment rights were created and reveal a story of hard choices surrounding one of America's great founding ideas.

Because of the landscaping work of the past few years, rallies, protests and other events within Independence National Historical Park have been held on other areas of Independence Mall, farther away from Independence Hall. The opening of People's Plaza will allow the park to once again approve permits for the block immediately across the street from Independence Hall. Sidles concluded the event by signing the first approved permit for a gathering on People's Plaza, for the Chestnut Hill Friends Meeting.

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