

Public Comments/Questions re Library Lot RFP #743
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2/26/10

Having lived in and loved downtown Ann Arbor for 37 years before leaving it for a retirement home, its future means a lot to me. My husband and I have always been proponents of downtown density. We have supported apartment buildings when others wanted to cling to historical remnants of old housing. But in my opinion, the proposed Convention Center is not what the downtown needs.

The ugliness of one of the proposed buildings is enough to warrant its demise right there. It appears as though in lieu of a handsome building, the architect has hoped to be original by defying gravity. But worse, it is not the kind of density we need. The in and out traffic of a Convention Center will merely crowd out what is needed for downtown - permanent residents, the kind that will bring stores that cater to them, not more restaurants, we have plenty of those, not more outfits selling souvenirs and arty objects. We need people for whom downtown is home.

But the most objectionable aspect of the proposed Convention Center is that in a society that prides itself on capitalist endeavor, the capitalists behind this endeavor expect the City to run the risk for them, to finance the project, and in very unsettled economic times at that. If private capital is not willing to stick their necks out, City Council has no right to expose the necks of Ann Arbor citizens.

Please, put a park and/or community center there. At least for now. Give Ann Arbor residents who live downtown, and Ann Arbor residents who come downtown, a center that will be meaningful in their lives.

Rose Wilson

2/23/10

It is unclear to me from what I've read if the city council has already decided to build a conference center/hotel or not. I hope not. I do not support this and would hope that this space could be put to better use.

Julia Eussen

2/7/10

The City Council should encourage true public input before making a decision on the Library Lot. Please note, to date there are no comments from the public received by this City request for Public Comments/Questions which support the push by City officials and developers for a conference center.

Peter Zetlin

2/2/10

This is the only central piece of 'land' available in the city and owned by the city. The commercial use of this property is not justifiable nor is selling bonds for said commercial abuse.

Trying to buy us off by creating 'green space' on Washington without sufficient parking for this proposed use creates greater problems for those that live on Washington.

Deborah Torres-Gordon

1/29/10

We have several concerns about the process that the Advisory Committee is apparently following regarding proposed hotel/conference center development for the Library lot on Fifth Avenue. When our city is struggling in severe financial crisis, how can city representatives engage in this high-pressure, fast-moving and reckless process involving non-essential projects? We urge you to slow down your deliberations and give the same time, respect and attention to the Ralph-Haber and Dahlmann proposals that you are so intensely focusing on the Acquest and Valiant projects.

In a recent AnnArbor.com article, Ed Surovell, Ann Arbor library board member and local real estate broker, stated: "Every other city in the state would give their right arm to have a project of this magnitude." Of course they would: they have all endured the death of their downtowns. No other Michigan city except Ann Arbor and Grand Rapids has a downtown that has remained continuously vibrant since its founding. Do we need large development - or greater vision? Most vital cities have dedicated public gathering and recreation spaces, such as Central Park in New York City, where residents and employees can find pleasures that offset the pressures of dense living and working space.

A conference center, on the other hand, serves transient purposes and puts economic pressures on our downtown. Jayne Miller, City community services administrator, states in an AnnArbor.com article that a conference center addresses the goal of increased density downtown. Increased density means more *residents* living downtown - not 150 or 190 hotel rooms. And residential development must include affordable living. So far, no proposal offers this. Will our city planners give our right arm to enable and support either of the two hotel/conference projects? The national ethos through the housing bubble was to build, build, build. As a result, the nation - including Ann Arbor - has a tremendous surplus of vacant commercial space. Hotel occupancy rates have fallen and are below the break-even point now and for the foreseeable future. Yet City officials and committee members are considering giving away the choicest and only remaining downtown public property to developers who will pay for the land only if their proposal makes money. This flies in the face of analyses showing that conference centers are very risky financial ventures.

Moreover, Acquest - one of the two hotel/conference center proposals - is asking the city to partner on a 40,000 square foot conference center on the former YMCA lot. This is unconscionable - risking that valuable property on a high-cost, high-maintenance facility that serves occasional uses, when our city has failed to replace the critically needed affordable

housing that the YMCA provided on that site, with its convenient location to the bus terminal and other downtown resources.

How can our City give up these two parcels to large scale commercial development? We will never have another opportunity like this one to create a public civic space. We were dismayed that the review committee dismissed two community-oriented proposals out of hand. The citizens of Ann Arbor deserve much better than this, and we applaud Sam Offen, who has championed an urban park concept in line with those two proposals.

Kathy and Angelos Constantinides

1/26/10

I am following the discussion and I am outraged that our city is willing to review another hotel and retail and office building space - we have empty spaces and locations all over town and downtown, do we want to empty out more - i am not following the intend of the City.

I do understand that they are concern with additional tax income - but if we empty more office space in and round down town we will not add more taxes even if we allow a new buildings

I am voting clearly to use this space for a park and recreational area for residents, like European cities show ore even New York. A place to relax and enjoy our wonderful City of Ann Arbor

As a concerned citizen who attended several the meetings I can only say it again please don't review any further hotel and office proposals.

Thanks,

Andrea Blom

1/21/10

I believe the most important aspect in developing specifications for a request for proposal is to understand and capture the needs and desires of the intended beneficiaries of the awarded project. I'll admit that I've not followed this project from the beginning, however from what I've read it appears that resident involvement in developing the specifications for the RFP was lacking.

The RFP stipulates that the awarded project must generate a positive financial return to the city. I can understand that the city might find a project requiring perpetual subsidies objectionable. I also understand that a commercial development would likely add more to the city's tax revenues than a park or public space. However, if it turns out that most residents prefer a park or public space, the magnitude of financial return beyond break-even should factor not into the decision making process.

I have reviewed the proposals submitted in response to this RFP. Personally, I find the idea of a multi-use public space with natural features, and perhaps a skating rink, as proposed by Dahlmann Apartments Ltd. very appealing. I believe this site is ideally suited to such a project and feel countless residents would enjoy it for many years to come. I can see this as a rest stop

for those running errands, and believe it could benefit local businesses in terms of greater patronage.

I urge you to listen to the residents, and not let dollars drive this decision. Consider those aspects that are less tangible and measurable, like personal enjoyment and well-being. Thank you.

Kevin Clark

1/21/10

Hi. I would like to see a transparent, fair and open process for choosing what will go on top of the library lot on 5th Ave. If we decide to go with something involving a commercial real estate developer, such as a conference center or mixed use development, the project needs to cash flow by itself with no monetary assistance from the city of Ann Arbor, and we need proof of a demonstrated need for such development, so it does not cannibalize existing businesses, but instead augments the city as a whole.

Thank you!

Kathryn Coon

1/21/10

I am deeply troubled by the direction you are taking for what goes on top of the old "Library Lot."

It appears that you have among yourselves made a plan for the use of this public land without allowing for the public to know and participate.

Currently you are listening to five responses to your Request for Proposals for use of this land. The public is allowed to be in the audience. But most of the public does not know about this opportunity to listen and ask questions, just as they did not know why the RFP was worded as it was. The public had not been heard in discussions preceding the RFP.

Your RFP stated that proposals shall be judged on their financial return to the City.

I believe that this is a mistake that must be corrected. The future use of this key open space at the heart of our city should be judged not for the money it will bring into City coffers but for its value as a common space belonging to all citizens now and in future generations. It is the only undeveloped space centrally located for a park large enough for community celebrations, rallies, demonstrations, for gatherings at times of shared grief, for musical and dramatic performances, for resting between errands, for recreation, for green respite in the midst of an increasingly dense downtown.

There are many other places where developers can build hotels or conference centers. But there is only this unique location for the urban park which Ann Arbor needs. And it already belongs to us.

I am worried that you are blinded by the terms of your RFP, which was worded with a foregone conclusion (a big hotel and conference center) already in mind. The City's current financial straits have also influenced your direction. With money so scarce and needs so great as during the present recession, it is tempting to lease this public land to a private developer in the hope of financial gain for the City. But it would be very wrong to bargain away the public's jewel – this community open space – FOREVER, just to ease our finances in a difficult time.

Besides, there is reason to doubt that a private development on this land, even subsidized by the city's investment in the parking and foundation supports, would bring in money at all. It might fail, as such proposals and structures have failed in the past. And we would be left with a white elephant and having lost forever our hope of a central urban park.

I am sure you do not want to be remembered as the people who bargained away our real treasure. Think of the regret we feel about losing our Courthouse Square in the 1950s. That was done to save money – a paltry amount compared to the loss of that green oasis, the historic gathering place since our town was first settled. Don't make that mistake again!

Please take a deep breath and set aside the requirement that the Library Lot be developed in a way to make a profit. Instead, put first the unique potential of this space to bring people together: a community space which can evolve to accommodate many activities, a place of beauty that will be remembered by all our generations and all who visit our town.

Mary Hathaway

1/20/10

When I read about a possible urban park for the top of the new library parking structure, I was very excited. My family and I live close to downtown, we walk and ride bikes to many locations throughout the city, including the library, and have been hoping that one of the park proposals would win out. As a former Dahlman business tenant, I put a lot of faith in his proposal. He was an outstanding landlord, managing his properties well and often putting in upgrades before they were requested. Given his track record, I feel confident that any proposal he stood behind would be nothing less than excellent.

Now I hear that the mayor and other members of the council have long since been talking to developers about putting a conference center on the site and are frustrated by delays imposed by the airing of alternative proposals. If true, this is outrageous. The citizens of the community have every right to influence the development of that parcel. It's in the middle of the city and their suggestions, concerns and opinions should be heard. Has anyone looked at the numerous under-utilized conferences centers in our economically depressed state? If Ann Arbor was able to draw considerable conference traffic, does the conference center need to be in the middle of our downtown? In my opinion, a park, rather than a conference center, would do much more to bolster Ann Arbor's reputation as a great little city.

I was glad to hear that time was spent last night to review the two urban park proposals. I'm really hoping that one of these wins out and that the underlying objective of "milking this property for as much as we can" is replaced with a commitment to uphold the high quality of life Ann Arbor residents have come to expect and appreciate.

Carol A. Seidl

1/20/10

Good Morning,

I have just learned that Chuck Skelton, president of Hospitality Advisors Consulting Group, a firm that performs site analysis, feasibility and valuation of hotels all over the country, recently stated that it's doubtful in these market conditions in Ann Arbor's small market that a hotel or conference ctr. could be successful.

Thank you for your consideration of this opinion from an expert.

Elizabeth Hunter
Ann Arbor

1/20/10

Ms. Kahn,

I've looked into these allegations in the last few days as on the face of them such actions seem suspect. However, as it turns out the Mayor and Mr. Fraser met only on a few occasions to share their perspectives on what the community's expectations were for the site. Valiant and other respondents sought that kind of input not only from Mr. Hieftje and Mr. Fraser but from many other stakeholders including but not limited to the Library Director, DDA Director, U-M officials, community leaders, Chamber President, and many others. Some respondents sought more input than others and over longer periods of time (in the case of Valiant). As best as I can tell, at no time has any City official pushed one proposal over another. Any deliberations over who should be recommended to the City Council for development of the site rest solely with the Library Lot RFP Advisory Committee (which I Chair). Furthermore, the proposals submitted are not the same concept clearly indicating that despite sitting down with the same individuals around town, the respondents came up with different ideas for the site. I hope that provides greater assurance that the process has not been biased. Moreover, we have allowed for a public input from the outset of the RFP review process and one which we intend to carry forward for as long as is appropriate prior to the Committee reaching consensus on a recommendation.

Stephen Rapundalo
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1/20/10

It has come to my attention that, beginning in 2008, discussions took place between Valiant Partners, LLD, Mayor Hieftje and Roger Fraser regarding a conference center on the Library Lot. I object that, while leading the citizens of Ann Arbor to believe they have a voice in the decision of what to do with the Library Lot, the mayor and others are trying to push through something that is not in the best interest of the city of Ann Arbor and its citizens.

Kitty B. Kahn

1/19/10

The entire process behind the Library Lot stinks. Smells like rotting fish.

By the timeline of events it's clear what was going on and that the Valiant Group had inside information and the inside track.

It is evident that there were discussions, emails and personal contact between Fraser, certain council members, the Mayor and Valiant BEFORE the the project or the RFP was made public. And to this day no-one has categorically denied that this is the case. Nor has anyone come forward to refute the allegations based on the now well known timeline of events.

This is outrageous behavior by a few council members who appear to have been in collusion with Fraser and Valiant.

How blind do you think people are?

Richard Cronn

1/19/10

I just read Sabra Briere's e-mail from Jan 18 recounting her experience and timeline for the discussions around the library parking lot redevelopment process. It makes for disturbing reading.

It's not so much that I'm in favor of any particular plan, it's the front-end loading of a rather specific plan that was put into the pipeline before public discussions could begin. The lack of transparency disturbs me, but what's doubly disturbing is that those involved in the "process before the process" seem to have thought that they needed to keep things in the shadows, suggesting a bit of guilt? I realize that many will say that this is the way things work: if things get too public too soon, then the developers will skitter off, prices will get out of whack, whatever... The thing is that so many of the development plans that have occurred in this city since I became interested in city politics (I've lived in Ann Arbor since 1985 -- it's home for me now) have had this same pattern: a shrouded pre-process, an invitation to the public to bring their ideas forward, a nice thank you and a bit of happy talk for citizen involvement, and then a return to what seems to have been pre-ordained. It's disheartening. It works against citizen involvement. It makes us cynical. My politics are pretty leftie but end up voting Democratic because that's what we have to work with.

But I'm really beginning to wonder if this one party city needs a shake-up. At the very least, I hope my time won't be wasted by the continual repeat of this pattern any longer.

With best wishes,

Tom Fricke

1/19/10

Does Ann Arbor need a hotel/convention center.....or does Ann Arbor need a space where our community can gather to celebrate, play, relax, sing, dance, create, and display art?

In my mind, those two options are what it's coming down to for the downtown library lot.

Liberty Plaza does not work as the open meeting/art space many Ann Arbor citizens and residents are envisioning. However, the library lot is perfect....and the possibilities for its use are endless. With a blank slate to work from, community input would be valuable for defining and creating a creative open space in downtown Ann Arbor.

Everyone I discuss this with shares my concerns that the powers-that-be want a convention center and nothing but. OK, if that's what you're set on, put it where Liberty Plaza is. The space does not work well for an open arts/meeting space....it's too confined, too small, and not as perfect a location as next door to Ann Arbor's downtown library. The corner of Division/Liberty, Liberty Plaza's location, is a perfect halfway point between downtown and campus....and thus a great spot for a convention center that would be used by both town and gown.

I urge you PLEASE to take your constituents wishes into consideration. This is the last space our community owns in the central city that can support this important....and greatly needed...civic function.

Thank you for considering my input.

Vicki Honeyman
Ann Arbor resident for 41 years