

Downtown Area Citizens Advisory Council Comments to the DDA—January 5, 2011

The Downtown Area CAC was fortunate to have Council Member Sabra Briere present at our meeting last night to give us a report on the progress of five meetings of the Outreach and Panhandling Task Force appointed by the Mayor and Council. Of particular interest was last month's meeting when the Task Force interviewed three downtown panhandlers. That confirmed our awareness that the problem is not just homelessness and that solutions must be related to dealing with the problems of substance abuse and mental illness as well as consideration of improving loitering and panhandling ordinances.

We also had an excellent report from Susan Pollay on DDA downtown RFP development strategies, transportation and parking issues. Our group has always supported area planning, and we strongly support the DDA's shaping of an over-arching strategy to develop city-owned downtown properties, to facilitate the process of writing/distributing effective RFP's and RFQ's to solicit developer proposals—of course, with broad public input and final City Council approval.

Related to that DDA goal, I want to recommend that everyone make an effort to attend the Citizen Participation meeting on the "Ann Arbor Hotel" now being proposed at the corner of South Division and East Washington. The meeting will be tonight on the third floor Meeting Room of the Ann Arbor District Library from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m. What are the issues and concerns, supportive and negative, regarding this project? Neighborhood critique of this proposal is absolutely essential. The hotel claims to be a "by right" proposal, meeting all the zoning requirements of the recently adopted A2D2 zoning. But how does it meet what we would consider to be acceptable design guidelines now near completion by the Design Guidelines Task Force? That group has been meeting weekly for a year. I have been assured that the hotel will conform to the new design guidelines when approved. Perhaps we will need to improve the guidelines? We believe this will be a real test of the design guidelines now being proposed.

Like it or not, that proposed hotel relates to what we can accept on the Library Lot, perhaps the Klines Lot. The RFP for the Library Lot was developed at a time when the housing market was collapsing. If we knew a 104 room hotel only two blocks away, with no parking on site, was going to be built, would that influence our RFP for both the Library Lot and perhaps the Klines Lot in the future? Of course it would—or should.

The CAC was able to give full support to the construction of the Zaragon 2 project because it was careful to conform to the A2D2 Zoning as well as the emerging design guidelines. After almost a year of weekly meetings, the Design Guidelines will be presented to the Ann Arbor City Council in a working session next Monday evening. Members of the eight downtown and near downtown residential neighborhood groups that worked with Mayor Hieftje and members of City Council to set up the Design Guidelines Task Force are planning to be there.