

Downtown Area Citizens Advisory Council Comments to the DDA—October 4, 2011

Last night was a very busy night for the CAC, but one that was very meaningful for the future of the downtown pedestrian experience—one in public art and one in design.

We began our meeting by gathering with hundreds of others to celebrate the installation of the Herbert Dreiseitl water sculpture in our new Municipal Plaza. Mayor Hieftje gave an inspiring speech on the value of Ann Arbor's percentage of art program and public art in the downtown and the entire the community—as did Marsha Chamberlin, Chair of the Public Art's Commission and Margaret Parker, the retiring chair. Members of the CAC could not agree more. For twenty years we have supported the percentage of art concept. Marsha Chamberlin is, of course, a member of the CAC. In the 1990's, Three of our CAC members worked with Jan Onder and Margaret Parker on DPAC,--the Downtown Public Arts Committee and (with the help of the DDA, and with guidance from Dick Mitchell of Mitchell/Mouat) shaped art elements and the first public art that went into the Fourth and Washington Parking structure.—part of a newly created Downtown Public Arts Committee.***Tell the story of meeting the Gephart family at Espresso Royale and the first money (\$25,000) for public art in the parking structure—accompanied by a \$13,000 contribution by Barbara Bergman in memory of her recently deceased husband Rueben Bergman, the former DDA Executive Director. Jan Onder, then succeeded in raising another \$80,000 in a matter of a few months.

After the Dreiseitl dedication, CAC members, joined by others, moved to our scheduled meeting space in the City Council Work Room to prepare the comments we would make before the Planning Commission which was meeting just next door for a public hearing on the “Varsity” project at 425 East Washington. As you know, the newly appointed Downtown Design Guidelines Board met for the first time in June. They identified areas of good design specified in our newly adopted A2D2 Downtown Design Guidelines that were present, or lacking, in the proposed Varsity project. The Design Review Board did a good job, but appearance before the Board is mandatory, compliance to the suggestions made by the Board is voluntary.

For the past several months, CAC members--along with many others--have urged the Varsity developers to improve their project along the lines suggested by the Design Review Board. To their credit--in private discussions, at the Citizen Participation Meeting, and in two Planning Commission meetings--the developers have made many changes that have improved the project. It includes a public mews from East Huron to E. Washington. Last night they added a small green roof. There are still other improvements that can be made. Last night, the Planning Commission unanimously approved the proposal as it is. Now it goes to City Council. The CAC will also be there for the public hearing and we will work for further improvements in design.

The Downtown Design Guidelines and the Design Review Board process are working. This is a part of an educational process for all of us. It will take time, but all of us will learn more about what good design is. Just like public art, good development design will make a difference in the downtown pedestrian experience. That is the goal of the CAC.