

Downtown Area Citizens Advisory Council Comments to the DDA—November 3, 2010

Last night's CAC meeting included a comprehensive and impressive update by Susan Pollay of the many local and regional transportation initiatives in which the DDA is currently involved. We also heard updates on the work of the Outreach/Panhandling Task Force as well as a report on the situation at Courthouse Square--which was not very promising. We will work on it. We are committed to keeping downtown A2 a safe and welcoming environment for residents and visitors alike.

Last night, Steve Kaplan, owner of the 30 unit apartment house on East Washington across the street from the new 4ll Lofts student housing, asked our help with a problem that has been our concern for many years—the pedestrian, vehicle passageway that separates his thirty units of downtown housing from the Liberty Square Parking structure.

What was once a significant pedestrian passageway between East Washington and Liberty--that downtown residents hoped would be used even more by new housing developments on East Washington, has become an isolated, unpleasant, even unsafe passageway almost closed off on East Liberty by an iron fenced outdoor hamburger plaza, a tight five foot passage, and a lot of unorganized stinking dumpsters that are not perceived as safe to pass. As a party to the condominium agreement for Liberty Square Parking structure and that passageway, it appears that the City of Ann Arbor is an accomplice in making this happen. Any development in town would require a plan. This one has none that we have seen. Kaplan plans to file a FOIA request to see why.

We have always opposed closing any portion of this long-time pedestrian passageway. Members of the CAC believe it is in the interests of all parties-- present and future residents and occupants of the downtown as well as nearby neighborhoods, McKinley, State Street, and the entire community--that we have approved plans for the future use and development of that passageway. We want to vitalize the downtown, enhance the pedestrian experience, and add to the business success of the State Street area.

The original DDA Plan of 1982 committed itself to improving mid-block pedestrian connections and other downtown improvements that would “strengthen linkages between activity centers to produce more effective pedestrian and non-motorist movement within the district.” (p. 25) The Downtown Plan of 1988 insisted that “Downtown’s appeal as a shopping and service center could be significantly enhanced by providing attractive ‘shortcuts’ through development blocks—in the form of open-air walkways, retail arcades, and atrium spaces...: to improve pedestrian linkages between parking structures, shopping frontages, as well as linkages to adjacent neighborhoods.” (p.42) Community commitment to pedestrian linkages were repeated in various forms in the Central Area Plan of 1992, the Calthorpe Recommendations of 2006 and most recently in the newly amended Downtown Plan and in the new A2D2 Zoning and Design Guidelines.

We need a carefully planned future for that alley that involves the entire community. The City owns a half interest in the property. We need a plan that will be in the interest of all parties, not just McKinley.

The concept of a well-lit pedestrian passageway, with windowed shops and attractive entrances and displays below is most compelling. The city's ownership interest in the passageway as well as the air rights can be negotiated in the future to provide additional possibilities for desirable development. Open the passageway to tables, chairs, street furniture, green space-- pedestrian activities of all kinds. If possible, make it an attractive space for gatherings and street events-- in inclement weather as well. The entire area should be a special amenity, another reason why people come downtown and nearby residential neighbors want to visit State Street.