

7 APRIL 2023

TO: City of Ann Arbor Council of the Commons  
VIA: Christopher Cespedes/ Management Assistant [ccespedes@a2gov.org](mailto:ccespedes@a2gov.org)  
FR: Robert Black/Center of the City Initiating Committee member  
RE: Council of the Commons Public Meeting, 6 April 2023

Reflecting on last night's Council of the Commons meeting, I wish to reiterate 4 key comments that I made during Public Comment concerning the Draft Scope of the RFP for Design Process:

RB COMMENT #1

**Section II, BACKGROUND, Subsection 1. History** refers to the fact that Ann Arbor has had “two downtown *commons*” over its history. Supporting Councilmember Haber’s and Councilmember Henny’s comments, I offered that the word *commons* be more clearly defined in the proposed RFP, both from the standpoint of History, and also from the present day movement for *Commons* as a phenomenon that is driving strong urban planning initiatives throughout the world. In my opinion, it is imperative for a progressive city like Ann Arbor to live at the cutting edge of such global paradigm shifts and that the comprehensive planning process called for in the proposed RFP include a statement to this effect. After all, the hub group driving this important initiative for Ann Arbor’s future is called “The Council of the *Commons*”.

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RB COMMENT #2

**Section III, DELIVERABLES, Subsection 1. Anticipated Results** desires that potential RFP respondents propose a design process that is “transformative, adaptable and inclusive”, and that such proposers be encouraged to “think outside the standard ‘box’” when engaging with the community directly to gain feedback. A list of considerations that *could* be included in the Design Process that follows the first two paragraphs of this subsection is helpful in not being overly prescriptive. However, one line item, originally drafted by Heather Seifert/ City Planning Services was intentionally deleted: “*includes a year-round civic center building, if feasible*”. The reason given for this deletion was that such a building would be “too expensive” or some other, in my opinion, *archaic mindset* that would keep Ann Arbor “in the box” of a limited approach to an innovative Design Process that calls for inspired and non-traditional solutions. To me, this does not serve a greater vision suitable to the caliber of an exemplary City like Ann Arbor, particularly given the deep wealth of its greater population, and its unique character as a community of highly creative and extremely generous people who *could* support and realize *any* vision perceived by them as worthy and inspiring.

Chair Zemke stated in the meeting that the general approach to the proposed RFP *should* be a “broad thinking, open-ended approach that would not cut out opportunities”. Deleting this important line item about “building” would not be in the spirit of his admonition. In fact, it disrespects the inputs of Ann Arbor citizens and the hundreds of hours of work by the Center of the City Task Force which clearly stated on Page 23 of its 2020 Report:

*“We have heard enthusiasm for a Civic Center Commons building that would host activities such as:*

*Commons decision making space.*

*Café*

*Community Theatre auditorium*

*Celebration room*

*Art gallery and studio*

*Visitors center*

*Exhibitions*

*Help and information center office*

*Wireless hot spot*

*Meeting space and classrooms*

*Peace place*

*Commons history and records”*

As the Task Force wisely recorded, these elements are critical components needed to create a complete and functional **“civic center commons”** as called for in Proposal A’s resolution. More importantly, the Center of the City Task Force’s Report leaves the door open to a variety of potential solutions to how this “building” will be realized. I believe that innovative solutions for both “building” and requisite funding (*whether public, private or some combination*) will flow naturally from an open and creative Design Process. As the functional needs of a **“civic center commons building”** are better defined by the successful Design Team’s professionals, I maintain that an as yet unforeseen solution will reveal itself. It may indeed be a creative blending of public and private architectural spaces distributed in collaborative arrangement between adjacent block partners and a newly constructed, appropriately-scaled and affordable facility (or facilities) on the Library Lot and over Library Lane – concepts which had been envisioned by Ann Arbor creative professionals over a decade ago. I assert here that private sector funders, including small and large donors from around the community would rally their financial and other good-will support to an inspired design solution. There exist numerous examples of how this process has worked in other communities to reduce the burden on future generations when only public monies are bonded into a project of this magnitude.

In previous feedback to the RFP planning committee, I proposed to reframe of the deleted line item about “building” noted above - so that a “building” remains as a design consideration that “could” be included within the proposed RFP, and that honors the spirit and recommendations of the Task Force’s report. My suggested line item for this subsection:

***Proposal A’s “civic center commons” will be defined in more detail upon further study and public input and may potentially include other physical facilities to be determined through the Design Process.***

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RB COMMENT #3

**Section II, BACKGROUND, Subsection 3. Site Details .** In the meeting, Councilmember Hammerschmidt suggested that the Google map in “The Block” paragraph be delineated to call out the three key Center of the City parcels so the map is more understandable to RFP responders that may not be familiar with the details of the site. I commented that this was a good idea... to remove the poor quality Google map shown in the draft RFP and replace it with a higher quality graphic map more appropriate to the experiences of professional responders to the RFP. I noted also that an example of such a map highlighting the three key parcels had been previously presented to the RFP planning committee:



RB COMMENT #4

**Section III, DELIVERABLES, Subsection 2. Community Engagement. .** While the proposed RFP will be ultimately issued through City Government entities, I suggested that it is imperative that the Council of the Commons ***seek alignment with its two allied non-profit entities: The Library Green Conservancy and The Center of the City Initiating Committee***. Clearly defining the roles and expectations of each of these three core groups will pay dividends toward acceptance of the RFP by City Parks Advisory Commission and City Council and also to the project as a whole.

Both Mr. Crockett and I commented that the Council of the Commons join with the LGC and the CoC IC to support two important ***community engagement events*** planned for *The Commons*.

- ***Earth Day Celebration***, April 22, 2023, International Theme: ***Invest In Our Planet.***
- ***Green Team’s Garden Wall Mural*** by local professionals: ***Tree Town Murals*** (May ’23).

For more information:

- ***Library Green Conservancy:*** [www.a2centralpark.org](http://www.a2centralpark.org)
- ***Center of the City Initiating Committee:*** [www.annarborcommunitycommons.org](http://www.annarborcommunitycommons.org)