

April 5, 2010

To: Ann Arbor City Council

From: Robert Johnson, Gwen Nystuen and others

Re: Fuller Intermodal Transportation Station (FITS) Project

Dear Mayor and Members of the Ann Arbor City Council:

A few months ago, City Council approved the initial steps toward constructing the Fuller Intermodal Transit Station project (FITS), also known as the Fuller Road Station. FITS is a 1000 place-five-level parking structure to be built on a three-acre site in Fuller Park, currently a surface parking lot, the structure designed to last 75 years and potentially expand to 8 stories with an additional 500 spaces. Although a rail station is promised in a possible Phase II, what is actually going to be built is a parking garage. 78% will be for the use of the UM Medical Center and 22% for the City.

This project seems to be a very poor deal for the City, and we respectfully ask you to consider some of the many questions that are raised by the project.

(1) What justifies the expenditure of \$10 million for a 1000 space garage on City parkland?

Although the City has not released any estimates of the cost of the project, a memorandum given to the UM Regents on January 21 said that the estimated cost of the parking garage is \$46 million. The City will pay 22% of the cost (\$10.3 million) and, in addition, the cost of an environmental impact study, and design work. So the City will be spending nearly \$11 million to build a parking structure whose primary user will be the University of Michigan.

The City has suggested that there will be a future Phase II, which would include a train station for the proposed Detroit-Ann Arbor commuter line. This argument, that the project is actually to benefit mass transit, is being used to defend the construction of the parking deck. However, there is no actual commitment or funding to build a train station, and it is very unlikely that there will be any need for a rail station in the foreseeable future.

Between 2005 and 2008, the Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) sponsored transportation studies including possible commuter rail in Southeast Michigan. They found that the predicted ridership of an Ann Arbor-Detroit Commuter Rail was too small to make it eligible to apply for federal funding. SEMCOG then designed the Ann Arbor-Detroit Commuter Rail "demonstration project", to show that ridership could be higher than the studies suggested. The demonstration project, to run for three years, planned to run four commuter trains a day, with five stops - at Detroit, Dearborn, a new station near Metro Airport with a connecting shuttle, Ypsilanti, and Ann Arbor. It would use the existing rail line belonging to the Norfolk-Southern railroad company, and be operated by the existing Amtrak stations. If the three year results show sufficient ridership, the project could then seek federal Newstart funding.

However, the roadway between Detroit and Ann Arbor has heavy freight traffic and cannot support this level of passenger use. The Federal stimulus package earmarked \$8.62 billion for high-speed rail (HSR) projects. Michigan, in a joint effort with seven other states, requested \$800 million for work on the Pontiac-Chicago route, including elimination of a significant number of conflicts with freight trains to improve Amtrak service. However, Michigan received only \$40 million, and the only part for the AA-Detroit commuter rail was restoring the Dearborn railroad station. As a result, the Demonstration Project is on indefinite hold. SEMCOG hopes that they will be able to run a few trains for special events such as the Thanksgiving Day parade or football games, beginning in October. [Details can be found on the SEMCOG web site:

[\[http://www.semco.org/TransportationBlog.aspx?id=88037&blogid=87637\]](http://www.semco.org/TransportationBlog.aspx?id=88037&blogid=87637)

Any commuter service between Detroit and Ann Arbor will require very large Federal support. SEMCOG estimates that even with good ridership the service will require \$8 million/year in subsidies. But federal funding will not be granted until the three-year SEMCOG Demonstration Project (which now has no start date) shows adequate ridership to justify the support. **There will be no need for a rail station on Fuller Road for many years, if ever.**

(2) Why is the City ignoring its own zoning ordinances?

The site of the proposed FITS belongs to the City. It's Public Land. The City's Ordinances allow the construction of parking garages on Public Land belonging to a park only if the structure serves a park use.

Here's the City Code:

5:10.13. PL public land district.

(1) Intent. This district is designed to classify publicly-owned uses and land and permit the normal principal and incidental uses required to carry out governmental functions and services.

(2) Permitted principal uses.

(a) Outdoor public recreational uses, such as: playgrounds, playfields, golf courses, boating areas, fishing sites, camping sites, parkways and parks. **No structure shall be erected or maintained upon dedicated park land which is not customarily incidental to the principal use of the land.**

If this project is built, it will set the precedent that the City can build whatever it likes in any of its parks. Isn't it the duty of Councilmembers to see that the City Ordinances are obeyed, not ignored?

(3) Why is the City paying \$10 million for parking spaces it doesn't need?

The City will have the use of about 200 spaces in the proposed parking structure if it gets

built. But **right now** there is a 200 space ground level City parking lot on the site in Fuller Park where the parking garage will be built. Why is the City planning to spend \$10 million for 200 spaces in a structure, when it has 200 ground level spaces now, **for free?**

In addition to the \$10 million capital costs, the City will pay 22% of the operating costs for the garage.

(4) Why is the City accepting a very small rental fee from the University?

Right now, UM pays the City \$61,000 for daytime use of about 500 parking spaces in Fuller Park. If FITS is ever built, these will be vacated, and the University will pay only \$19,000/year for the use of 800 parking spaces in FITS, a City-owned garage sitting on City parkland.

(5) Why won't the City allow the voters to decide?

In 2008, the Ann Arbor electorate overwhelmingly approved a charter amendment (Section 14.3(b) of the City Charter) requiring a vote on sale of any parkland. Since a long term lease to the UM is equivalent to a gift or sale, the project should be subject to voter approval at a regular election.

(6) Why is there a rush to commit \$10 million?

If FITS is really about rail transit, City Council should not fund the FITS project until the Ann Arbor-Detroit Transit Demonstration Project is complete and enough ridership is shown to qualify the Ann Arbor-Detroit commuter rail line for federal funding. **Without that funding, there will be no commuter service and no need for a rail station at Fuller Road.**

We ask City Council to reconsider their \$10M commitment to this unnecessary project.

Respectfully submitted,

Bob Johnson <rmj8976@sbcglobal.net> and Gwen Nystuen <gnystuen@umich.edu>