

Comment on Current Public Benefits Proposal for Street and Alley Vacations Associated with the Washington State Convention Center Addition



To: Seattle Design Commission – Michael Jenkins, Director; Ross Tilghman, Chair
CC: Beverly Barnett and Councilmembers Sally Bagshaw, Mike O'Brien, Lisa Herbold, Kshama Sawant, and Rob Johnson
From: The Community Package Coalition

The public benefits package required of the Washington State Convention Center (WSCC) Addition is a rare opportunity for a single project to promote community wellness in Seattle's urban core.

Unfortunately, despite the Community Package Coalition's contact with the applicant and attendance at the Seattle Design Commission over the past few months, the proposed WSCC Addition public benefits package still falls far short of community and City Council expectations. We have discussed our proposed Community Package in great detail in previous correspondence, and we continue to affirm that its adoption would provide reasonable and commensurate public benefits in exchange for the vacation of 1.28 acres of the public's land.

Full consideration and adoption of the Community Package would advance a comprehensive vision for a safe, accessible, and vibrant Center City currently lacking in the applicant's benefits proposal. The vision we present, through physical projects and funding allocations, is of an expanded Convention Center poised to enable economic progress for all, especially those most impacted by this massive development.

The elements explicitly called for in the Design Commission's November 2015 letter are: placemaking, connections, public art, and the transportation network. By incorporating a variety of proximate improvements to streets, public spaces, and housing subsidies, the Community Package offers an achievable vision for a richly textured, exciting, safe, and welcoming subarea connected with safe multi-modal transportation options at the confluence of four neighborhoods. We encourage the WSCC to adopt the Community Package in order to meet the Design Commission's expectations for a well-rounded and ambitious suite of public benefits.

Lack of Engagement

We are disappointed that the development team of this public project, using public funding on public land, has not shown an eagerness to be transparent and collaborative.

In response to the project, the single largest real estate development in Seattle history, we have formed an unprecedented alliance of nonprofits, community organizations, and advocacy groups to ensure the public gets a fair deal. We are ready and willing to negotiate in good faith with the applicant. But despite our interest in mutual collaboration, neither the WSCC Board of Directors nor Pine Street Group has made a serious effort to engage with the coalition as a whole. The public benefits open house in December 2016 was a good start, but, critically, it did not foster a two-way dialogue.

The developers believe that they have presented a public benefits package that addresses community priorities, but in this regard it has far to go. Since first unveiling their public benefits package in February, the development team has not made significant progress. The current public benefits package still only funds 25 percent of the Community Package, with most projects completely unfunded and others receiving token support.

We have a sincere interest in moving the WSCC Addition forward and being strong advocates for this development, but until the Board of Directors and/or their project team directly address opportunities to substantially improve the public

realm and neighborhood quality of life their public benefits proposal will continue to be inadequate and lack a cohesive vision.

Legitimacy of In-Lieu Funds

The Seattle Design Commission has a long history of approving monetary or planning-level public benefits, and Seattle City Council Resolution 31142 provides the framework for this. Our coalition is therefore concerned that the Design Commission is ignoring precedent and dismissing potential quality public benefits by questioning the legitimacy of proposed in-lieu fund transfers from the applicant to the City of Seattle.

As of this writing, those proposed in-lieu payments as part of the Community Package include funding for affordable housing, street improvements, Freeway Park modifications, and the Interstate 5 lid study. These are community-sponsored projects vetted by the City of Seattle, and their chances for success are not in question. Department leaders have repeatedly assured us that in-lieu funds are appropriate because many of the Community Package projects are still in early planning stages.

It is not reasonable to expect the applicant to design City projects in the public realm, nor is it wise to ask the applicant to identify sites to receive affordable housing funds. Therefore we urge the Commission to not roadblock in-lieu payments that will benefit the community. Alternatives may include referring any discussion of in-lieu funding to City Council or waiting for the relevant City departments to develop 30 percent designs.

Merits of the Current Public Benefits Proposal

We have both concerns and praise for elements of the WSCC's current public benefits proposal.

Rooftop Terrace Access: While we are intrigued at the opportunity to add public access to a large open green space in our dense downtown environment, the proposed rooftop terrace should not be counted as a public benefit. Large public facilities require quiet gathering areas for visitors to sit, rest, eat, or meet privately. Such a feature is not exceptional, it is the standard.

In addition, as referenced in the project's Final Environmental Impact Statement (such as on page 4.2.10-3) and the February 2016 presentation to Design Commission (slide 50), the rooftop terrace has long been designed into the project. We believe the rooftop terrace should remain in the design, but it is inappropriate to suddenly double-count access for this private feature as a public benefit.

Furthermore, the proposed access is not reflective of a true public benefit. Five stories of narrow stairs and a diminutively-scaled outdoor elevator that will inevitably be prone to mechanical problems would not be welcoming to the general public. The proposed routing through an inward-facing plaza is also problematic. The current design begs the questions: Who asked for this? What type of person would go there? Why would they go there? How would they know how to get there? Why would they stay there? The terrace currently comprises over a third of the total public benefits offering and yet hasn't answered these fundamental planning and equity questions.

The design and accessibility of the rooftop terrace are not reflective of the design values one would expect to see in a space singularly designed for the benefit of the public. The elevator shaft and stairwell evoke the design aesthetic of a parking garage rather than signifying a prominent entrance to a multi-million dollar public open space. The single bank elevator does not appear to invite use by the public and realistically, few people will choose to climb the five flights of stairs leading to the terrace. In the presentation, the applicant does not adequately address how the general public will know about the rooftop terrace and the design cues presented by the applicant are insufficient for guiding the public to that space.

Pine-Boren Lid Park: Current urban design theory promotes public spaces at street level to encourage greater equality of access and connectivity. An alternative to the rooftop terrace would be lidding I-5 at the corner of Pine Street and Boren Avenue, which is supported by SDOT and endorsed by our coalition. Though this approximately 14,000 square foot addition to Plymouth Pillars Park would be a smaller space than the rooftop terrace, it would be truly public at all times on all days and it would be much more visible and accessible to all people. It would also fit within the overarching theme of neighborhood connections by beginning to repair the massive gash between Capitol Hill and Downtown caused by the freeway construction.

The WSCC has a strong legacy in such reconstructions, as seen with their original facility above I-5 to the south. And the WSCC Addition is proposing a bold cantilever at the east corner of the site. Lidding the small adjacent airspace across the intersection would build upon the development, leverage existing City-owned public space, and become an enormously positive benefit for the surrounding neighborhoods.

Other On-Site Benefits: A large portion of the proposed public benefits are on-site elements such as setbacks, larger windows, and street level uses. Most of these are standard outward facing features of a major urban public facility that would occur without any vacations. For example, the plaza at the corner of 9th Avenue and Pine Street is clearly a standard entry for a large building. To claim such architectural features as public benefits is disingenuous, especially given that these elements helped the project separately qualify for design review approval and urban design merit.

However, we are supportive of the variety and distribution of the pocket parks, such as the Pine Street Sun Garden, the Boren Avenue hillclimb, and Terry Avenue Green Street Plaza. The plant choices and seating opportunities will add comfort and intrigue to a busy public realm that needs opportunities to sit, rest, and observe.

Public Art: We are excited about the amount of resources dedicated to the art program for the building and surrounding area. The current WSCC has a strong public art legacy and it makes sense that this next generation facility would continue that stewardship. A robust public art program presents a unique opportunity to deeply invest in placemaking and expressive art which reflects principles of equity and accessibility.

However, we do find the current quality of the art plan lacking in details and impact. The current proposal feels somewhat underwhelming and piecemeal. We are hopeful the art programming will be strengthened to offer a scaled up and more cohesive approach in later Design Commission meetings.

Freeway Park Improvements: We appreciate the inclusion of Freeway Park improvements in the applicant's proposal. However, we continue to assert that this park deserves a greater investment than what has been proposed given the scale of the WSCC Addition. This 5.2 acre park is adjacent to the current Convention Center and will require major improvements to properly serve the large increase in use by conventioners and local service workers. The Freeway Park Association and Seattle Parks and Recreation Department will conclude a study of community informed improvements by the end of this year. That improvement plan should be used to guide future investments in the Park at a level that will support meaningful upgrades.

Historic Building Lighting: Providing enhanced lighting to privately-owned for-profit structures is not a public benefit. Lighting does not further historic preservation, nor would it be easily visible at the street level after the WSCC Addition is built. We strongly oppose this transfer of public funding to private property owners, particularly those entities projected to profit heavily from the construction of the WSCC Addition facility, and we believe it should be removed from consideration.

Affordable Housing: Although not a traditional public benefit, the City's street vacation policies do not prohibit affordable housing funding from being included in a public benefits package. We believe that affordable housing should be the most significant component of WSCC's proposal, ensuring that this project has meaningful equity outcomes that are appropriately scaled for the size of the project and impact of the loss of right of way. The applicant appears to agree, having expressed an interest in making a contribution to help create new affordable homes for low-income workers and families.

However, the proposed public benefit to provide funding to build 40 affordable homes is not nearly enough to help address impacts this project will have on the local housing market. The proposed contribution would not come close to funding the Community Package's vision of supporting 300 income-restricted homes, nor fully meet the demand for subsidized affordable housing generated by the minimum wage workers employed by the WSCC and related hospitality industry, which we estimate to be greater than 500 homes.

Notably, this 11-story Convention Center Addition and the co-development sites are not subject to Mandatory Housing Affordability (MHA), as the project vested prior to MHA adoption in downtown. If the project had been subject to MHA, the applicant would have been required to provide hundreds of affordable housing units on site in the co-developed residential tower or pay a \$22.5M-\$27M fee-in-lieu to the City's Office of Housing. Can the current affordable housing proposal genuinely be considered a public benefit if it is falling far short of what is required by code today?

Pike and Pine Street Improvements: Acknowledging the complexity of integrating with the Pike/Pine Renaissance, One Center City, and working with WSDOT, we appreciate the applicant's intent to contribute to bike and pedestrian safety upgrades for the Pike-Pine corridor. Because efforts on these two streets are still in early planning stages, we support in-lieu funds for building protected bike lanes between 2nd Avenue and Broadway and potential sidewalk widenings and landscape enhancements in the vicinity of the WSCC, including the I-5 overpasses. The current funding and scope proposed by the applicant falls woefully short of what is needed to implement real neighborhood connections as prioritized by the Design Commission.

Olive Way and 9th Avenue Improvements: We support the minor landscaping and sidewalk upgrades proposed for the small triangle site between 9th Avenue, Howell Street, and Olive Way. These are positive changes for public right-of-way that is currently in poor condition, and will enhance the pedestrian experience moving to and from the WSCC site. Similarly, we are supportive of the landscaping improvements proposed along 9th Avenue near and at the intersections with Pine and Pike Streets. Reduced curb radii will improve pedestrian safety and improved landscaping will enhance the street environment.

However, we remain concerned that the overall scope of street improvements does not appear to extend beyond the project site. These improvements seemed focused on where WSCC staff and visitors will most likely travel between the two WSCC facilities, which is clearly a private gain for the development. A public benefits vision truly in service of the community would incorporate, at a minimum, the Olive Way overpass safety improvements proposed by SDOT and endorsed by the coalition, and possibly other street improvements such as an Olive Way safety reconfiguration extending into Capitol Hill.

Night Watch: We believe the proposal to provide a space for the Night Watch emergency shelter is a positive contribution to the homelessness crisis in Seattle. We look forward to learning more about this concept. We are concerned about the displacement of this critical service after five years, and would like to know if the 5-year lease could be extended or if a suitable property can be offered for permanent operations and/or transfer to the City of Seattle.

Preferred Outcomes

If the WSCC and Pine Street Group engage in a good faith negotiation effort with the coalition, we believe the objectives of all parties can be achieved. Our preferred outcomes are:

- Completion of a Convention Center Addition which contributes to sustained and equitable economic development for all workers.
- A safe, multi-modal transportation network which connects this national destination to and through its surrounding neighborhoods in a way which prioritizes pedestrian, bicycle, and transit users.
- Vibrant, accessible, and legible public spaces built with best practices in urban design which serves the needs of conventioners, workers, and residents of Center City.
- Investment in affordable transit-oriented housing which allows for the Convention Center's many low-wage workers to live near their workplace and benefit from the public investment in infrastructure associated with the project.

We are eager to work collaboratively to ensure the goals of the community, the City of Seattle, and the applicant can be achieved in a fair and transparent way. We believe our vision for this project as stated above can be a shared vision, one that creates a successful and exciting new addition to our urban core while linking parts of our community that have been fractured and mitigating unintended consequences of such a large development. We would hope that the applicant and the community can join together in a design strategy with meaningful public benefits to achieve this common vision, including the elements of placemaking, connections, public art, and the transportation network.

Sincerely,

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