

Jan. 31, 2024

To: Members of the Portland Design Commission

CC: Tim Heron

I'm writing to offer some background on the interim design proposed for Darcelle XV Plaza. The current scheme is troubling in both how it was conceived and what it signals about the future of our downtown.

In spring of 2023, as Executive Director of the Portland Parks Foundation, I led a comprehensive public involvement process to solicit community members' hopes for the plaza, then known as O'Bryant Square. PLEASE NOTE: I retired from the Foundation last September, therefore this communication in no way reflects the views of the Portland Parks Foundation's board or staff. I offer it to you as background from a community member and advocate for the health of Portland's downtown public spaces for 30-plus years.

There is much to hope for in a public space honoring one of Portland's most iconic and generous citizens: Robert Cole/Darcelle XV. But the process and result so far are setting two deeply troubling precedents:

- As proposed, Darcelle XV Plaza will be the first fenced and gated public plaza in Portland history
- As currently conceived, Darcelle XV Plaza's design has been directed by almost entirely by narrow group of private interests

The outreach effort I led with the Foundation, called "Reimagining O'Bryant Square," unfolded over two months last year. We raised over \$150,000 in in-kind services and direct contributions from government, business, and philanthropy with a hope: create a new, community led public space in a tough, complicated neighborhood that would be safe, welcoming to all, and a showcase for the diversity of Portland life.

It began with six webinars pairing national experts from the Harvard Loeb Fellowship with local experts to explore best practices from elsewhere and the opportunities and challenges of the space. It was followed by a week-long series of gatherings:

- Seven focus groups with groups from social services, urban youth, government officials, property owners, businesses, arts groups, and staff and clients from Multnomah County Behavioral Health Resource Center.
- An open house in the former Finnegan's toy store led by PSU's Center for Public Interest Design
- A one-day charrette involving 14 local design teams to synthesize schemes from the many ideas the community had

This was easily the most comprehensive community outreach efforts on a downtown space in my time in Portland. I've attached the preliminary report outlining the ideas and visualizations. The ideas we heard ranged from honoring the surrounding district's Queer history to providing a dog park to building affordable housing half the block. Artists wanted a stage, electrical outlets, and lights. Others hoped for plantings, pop-up retailers, or a skatepark. A large percentage wanted food carts in a nod to the birthplace of Portland internationally renowned food cart scene on the adjacent Block 216.

Staff and clients from the Behavioral Health Resource Center and other social services talked hopefully about a safe plaza that could also help serve those in need. What's more, they wanted to be involved in helping it be safe. Indeed, many participants not only offered ideas but wanted to pitch in to bring the plaza to life with events, pop ups, and services.

Out the 1,000-plus participants, only one person advocated for fencing the plaza: a representative from Portland Clean & Safe.

Soon after Reimagining O'Bryant Square, Portland Parks & Recreation released a Request for Interest. Two organizations applied:

- Portland Clean & Safe proposing a fenced space with a dog park and wanting city money to pay for security and programming
- Friends of the Green Loop proposing a food cart pod the profits of which would provide security and programming

Before those proposals were reviewed, the developers of the Ritz Carlton and the owner of UnderU4Men (also attached) wrote letters to Commissioner Dan Ryan calling for the plaza to be fenced, to have a dog park, and for there to be no food carts.

The small advisory committee on which I sat scored the Friends proposal higher. All voiced concerns about the fence. All believed a small group of food carts would help animate the space and keep it safe.

PPR ignored our recommendation and began immediately began negotiating with Clean & Safe, inviting a representative to join the design meetings. Thus, the proposed design before you may have a few echoes of what we heard in Reimagining O'Bryant Square. But the fence and dog park—and the complete absence of food carts—can be directly attributed to the demands of narrowly focused private interests.

For certain, these are complicated times for our downtown. With the Ritz Carlton and downtown's largest cluster of hotels on one side and the Behavioral Health Center and a the largest cluster of social services on the opposite side, Darcelle XV Plaza will be bracketed by the extremes of our society. Everbody who participated in Reimagining O'Bryant Square understood the challenges, but the vast majority also saw an opportunity for Portland to face these challenges with compassion, creativity, and community, not with barricades and exclusion.

Public space is in downtown Portland's DNA: the Park Blocks, the Halprin fountain plazas, Waterfront Park, Pioneer Courthouse Square, Director Park, Jamison Square, and Tanner Springs Park. To create them, we tore up highways, stopped parking garages, and made plazas the first priority in how new parts of the city would develop. With Pioneer Square, notably, the community rose up against business leaders' desire to enclose it with an atrium and control access. Building the first fenced public plaza in Portland history will be a sad punctuation mark on an amazing legacy, a concession to private interests as opposed to community hopes, and a signal to visitors, investors, and ourselves what we believe the future of downtown Portland will be.

Thank you for your consideration.

Randy Gragg