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To Portland Design Commission

Re: Darcelle XV Plaza Interim Design Proposal

Good day, Design Commissioners.

My name is Gil Kelley and I served as Planning Director for the City of Portland between 2000 and 2009. During that time, I and others conceived of the Mid-Town Blocks Urban Design and Development Strategy (the development of a vital urban infill and pedestrian space mix between SW Park and Ninth Streets running from SW Salmon Street to Burnside Street, linking the North and South Park Blocks) and later the Green Loop (complimenting the closer Riverfront Loop that together will link the east and west sides of the River in the Central City). These signature urban design elements (“big moves”), along with zoning amendments that have promoted the development of more housing in the adjacent West End, form the armature of this Park redesign and its long-term improvement. I believe this armature of aspired active uses and open space should inform the specifics of the re-envisioning and design for Darcelle XV Plaza, including its interim phase.

I am grateful for and delighted by the numerous public and private investments that have helped to realize the Midtown Blocks, Green Loop and West End vision over the last 15-20 years. This armature and it’s underlying values of improving human health, fostering positive social interaction, enhancing retail vitality and creating a vibrant city identity are still important today and, I hope, will inform your decisions and the continuing work to improve the physical design and programming of this important space. The new plaza has the opportunity to greatly improve upon the former O’Bryant Park design and contribute to the vitality of downtown as it rebounds from the global pandemic and finds solutions to on-going social issues that are present in so many of America’s downtowns. It is in some ways the missing link in the necklace of active, pedestrian-oriented open spaces in the midtown. With this context in mind, I’m here today to speak on some specific concerns I have with design for the interim improvements proposal for the Plaza that is before you today. My hope is that you, as a Commission charged with upholding the values of optimizing public use of public space and knitting that together successfully with the urban fabric around it through good design, will help improve *four key aspects* of the proposal:

Understanding that sufficient funds are not currently available for the permanent improvement of this park – in my view it may take a decade or more to realize the requisite funds for the long term improvements to the Plaza, meaning the interim design and improvements must suffice in the meantime – and further understanding that the safety and livability challenges in downtown are great today and that the design of the former park here may have contributed to those challenges, I would like to express four main concerns about the proposed design for the interim park improvements:

1. Fencing it off
2. Dedicating a prime corner of the park space to a dog park
3. Not making accommodations for food carts and pop-ups around the periphery
4. Not clearly committing to sufficient funding, programming and management to help regularly activate the space and keep it clean and safe

These four elements can make or break the success of this space, if they are not gotten right. I'll briefly explain my concerns with each. Taken together, in a general sense, this means acknowledging that these particular design elements require a paradigm shift in thinking from that represented in the interim design proposal about how best to provide safe public spaces and to optimize the chances that the interim design and uses will inform the permanent design and improvement when those funds do become available.

Fencing – Given the history of this part of downtown and the park and its immediate proximity, the defensive impulse to fence it is understandable. However, experience in city after city has shown that fencing off parks, even with attractive design and gates leads to diminished public use, a sense of privatization, eliteness and unwelcomeness and, in some cases, worsened conditions on the periphery. In a bold (seemingly counter-intuitive) experiment recently in the Bronx in New York City, fences (nicely designed) were torn out of several parks and plazas and the public use and sense of safety and welcomeness went up dramatically. This should be core to the rethinking of Darcelle XV plaza, particularly when combined with measures around uses and programming noted below.

In the case of this plaza if there is to be a gatekeeper or other paid security presence on site that person or presence could operate and send the desired signals that this is for positive public use and behaviors without a fence. That, in combination with active use features inside and surrounding active uses like food carts, you can send a signal that the public is welcome and using it will be inviting and pleasant. It will likely be more active than a fenced, semi-privatized park. If this is done well, it can perform like Director Park or Pioneer Courthouse Square, plazas that we would not think of fencing.

Dog park – While the dog park is not necessarily a harmful element and may be useful for some nearby residents, it occupies precious space for more active and inclusive public uses. It's location at a key corner of the site would seem better used for more active complimentary uses, as noted below.

Food carts and pop-ups on the periphery – food carts -which can be permitted and controlled through placement and design standards – have proven to be a very popular and positive influence in many places in Portland (including formerly on the adjacent Ritz Carlton site prior to its development) and could help draw daytime and early evening users to this park and contribute to both use of the park and the retail energy of the district. These features should be allowed and encouraged with demarcated zones adjoining the central portion of the park. A prime location for this would be on the southeast corner where the proposed dog park is shown.

Programming – This can be the true make-or-break component of downtown public spaces. It will likely require City/non-profit cooperation that has a *clear strategy and experience in delivery*. It is reasonable to expect funding from some City sources and from the selected non-profit organization charged with management and programming of the space with contributions from surrounding property owners. Such funding for events and active programming will protect and enhances these private investments while adding another civic gem to downtown’s identity as a lively and culturally diverse place that welcomes the public. The challenge will be to march the management and programming strategy and funding with the aspirations for the plaza and those community values, mention in the opening above. In San Francisco, social service organizations and homeless or formerly homeless individuals were engaged and employed in turning around the quality and sense of safety and desirability of several public spaces. This kind of strategy could be employed here. The current proposal for interim management and programming should be charged with clarifying its strategy and engaging partners who can deliver on the multiple aspects of activation and security, particularly in the early years.

I hope these thoughts will be helpful in your deliberations. I have no doubt that if done right, Darcelle XV Plaza can become a true source of pride and a gem in the necklace of Midtown - Green Loop public spaces.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Kelley', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Gil Kelley, FAICP