

City Council Comments, Lents Park Master Plan April 13, 2011

Thank you, City Council and members of the Project Advisory Committee, for the chance to add comments to this process today. My name is Paulette Filz, and I am here to represent Friends of Lents Park. This is a group that was formed two years ago, when it became apparent that residents of Lents felt a need for more direct input into decisions made regarding our special park.

We are, for the most part, largely very happy with the Master Plan. One of the strongest points that residents made was for current features to be renovated and maintained, rather than moved or changed. We are pleased to see that much of the plan does this.

One disappointment we have, however, is that, once the open houses, listening sessions, and PAC meetings and votes were over, it was the sole responsibility of the landscaping contractor, Walker Macy, to write the text that accompanies the plan. There were a number of points in this text that changed the wording of PAC recommendations, or weakened it, or misrepresented the consensus of the public's input. For this reason, Friends of Lents Park has submitted both a commentary and a written testimony, to become part of the historical record of this process. I will not itemize all these points now, but I would like to call the council's attention to three examples.

First, in every method of public feedback, the neighborhood consistently requested that the gazebo stay in its current central location. On page 38, Walker Macy's text states that the gazebo is slated to be moved, not because of public desire, but to make room for the new synthetic soccer field. In fact, the people who live closest to the new location were nearly unanimous in signing a petition opposed to the move. These concerns are not reduced by the vague language in the text that the structure will receive "any acoustic upgrades". Our group requests that before any siting work begins, *exper* / acoustical advice is sought. Residents closest to the current location know that the Portland Parks and Recreation pledge "to manage any noise impacts" has not resulted in any improvement for those affected by excessive sound levels. The language in the Master Plan is too vague to reassure neighbors.

Our second concern is the removal of the "wall ball" wall with its mural. While the wall ball may be under-utilized, there is great pride in the mural on the back of it. While the plan calls for a new mural somewhere, couldn't this wall be relocated to function as a sound baffle near the gazebo, thus saving the current mural, and improving sound control? A new mural is fine, but there is no reason to discard the one that already exists.

Third, the language regarding tree removal for the skate spot is weaker than that desired by the PAC and the neighborhood. We have asked that it be located there **on the condition that tree removal be minimized.**

The text as written by Walker Macy does not emphasize this point; indeed, it does not even mention tree removal.

As both the skatespot and the gazebo are listed under Priority Two in the implementation plan, there is time to make sure that these concerns are addressed before actual work begins. We strongly request that this occurs.

This Master Plan is a positive step in bridging the gap between Lents and City Hall.

What would improve it even more would be creating listening sessions for public input *before* any concept plans are drawn up, rather than as an afterthought. We hope that this will occur, as this plan goes into effect.

Our sincere thanks to the PAC, the Parks bureau and everyone involved with this brighter prospect for Lents Park.

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Friends of Lents Park Written Testimony on Lents Park Master Plan Report

Endorsed by FLP membership, April 6, 2011

Executive Summary: Friends of Lents Park participated in all public aspects of the development of this Master Plan, and we are in very large part happy with the results. We continue to have concerns about the process we needed to go through to obtain these results, and hope lessons are learned for the future.

We believe the Master Plan Report prepared by Walker Macy contains multiple inaccuracies and have placed our own Commentary in the record by separate document.

We have three substantive points on which we think the Master Plan needs to be augmented and clarified. Although none of these points require revision of the plan itself, we seek assurance from the City Council that they will be considered at future implementation stages.

1. Prior to finalizing any schematic plans for relocation of the gazebo, expert technical input needs to be sought into issues of (a) acoustical design to minimize noise impacts on the neighborhood; and (b) angle of the sun relative to performers and audiences.
2. In placing the “skate spot” next to Walker Stadium, every effort needs to be made to minimize impact on trees and avoid the need for tree removal.
3. When “wall ball” is removed from the park, the mural on the back of this wall needs to be preserved and a new home found for it.

We appreciate the opportunity to participate in this process, and thank all the parties involved for their efforts.

Role played by FLP in the process: Friends of Lents Park (FLP) is a grass-roots neighborhood group. Although we have no formal membership requirements, over 800 people signed our petition during the campaign against a Beavers baseball stadium in the park. We estimate that at least 100 of those people re-mobilized during this Master Plan process to participate in meetings and Open Houses, and probably more than that filled out public comment forms. A very large proportion, possibly even the majority, of the public who participated in this process were “our people.” (This can be seen especially in the Master Plan photos at pp. 14, 50 and 82.)

FLP's mission is as follows: "We seek to preserve, maintain and enhance Lents Park as Open Space in its entirety, for the enjoyment of future generations. We support the neighborhood and surrounding community in all uses of the park that are consistent with this mission."

Throughout the Master Planning process, FLP has taken very seriously its mission to support all uses of the park. We have resisted calls for us to act as a special interest group and "just say what you want for the park." What we have always wanted has been a democratic process whereby decisions would be made based on what the majority of the community wanted. We have largely attained this goal, but at the cost of far more aggravation than should have been necessary, had the public involvement process been better designed.

Overall response to Master Plan results: Ours is a diverse group representing a wide variety of park users, so obviously not all of our members are happy with all aspects of the final Site Concept Plan. But overall, we are very largely satisfied that democracy has been served, and that the changes proposed to the park are supported by a majority of the community. (One unfortunate exception is the decision to relocate the gazebo, which will be addressed below.)

Most of the changes outlined in the final Site Concept Plan fall into the category of repair and renovation of the park's existing features: the children's play area, the tennis courts, the dog park, Walker Stadium, Vavrek Field. Our members have been requesting these renovations for years, and in some cases have received promises that were never kept. We are very happy to have a better vehicle for moving forward with these needed projects.

The most significant changes contemplated by the final Site Concept Plan are the addition of a large swath of botanical plantings along the park's southeastern edge, and the re-programming of the park's central section to accommodate garden space, additional trees and opportunities for passive recreation. Our group did not start out advocating for these changes, but when the ideas were raised, we gave them a fair hearing. Ultimately a majority of our members agreed with these changes, and we are excited to see the central part of the park take on more of a "garden" character while still accommodating the sports players who use it.

We remain concerned that some of the "little" things our members have been requesting for years (better trash pickup, lighting, benches, water fountains, etc.) were considered too trivial for inclusion in this Master Plan. We've been assured not to worry, these will be included in future implementation phases; but our members have experienced many broken promises from the City over the years.

We also remain concerned about issues of repair and maintenance over the next 25 years. It is easier to borrow money to build something new than to find funds to maintain what you have. We fear that if and when the new features of the Master Plan are built, they will ultimately be as badly neglected as what's in the park now. We were dismayed by some of the financial information that came out of the Listening Sessions and what this says about the priorities of our City government. We were assured that \$800,000 for a synthetic soccer field is no big deal, the money can be found; but were then told that \$100,000 a year to provide doggie waste bags *for the entire Portland Parks system* is completely unrealistic.

We plan to remain engaged with the implementation of this Master Plan, and are cautiously optimistic for its success.

Substantive issues with final Master Plan: Aside from technical issues with the language of the narrative (addressed in a separate Commentary), FLP has identified three substantive issues where we believe the Master Plan document requires augmentation and clarification to fully reflect the will of the community. **None of these points require revision of the plan document itself; rather, we seek Council assurance that these points will be considered in future implementation stages of the plan.**

1. **Relocation of Gazebo:** The final Site Concept Plan envisions relocation of the park's gazebo, which provides event and performance space, from the north end of the park's central section to the south end. Relocation would flip the orientation of the gazebo, so that performers on stage would face north and their audiences would face south.

As the Master Plan correctly states on p. 38, the gazebo is slated to be moved in order to make room for the new synthetic soccer field which will be located adjacent to Walker Stadium. While there are valid reasons for the new location of the soccer field (maximizing the continuity of botanical plantings), there is no particular reason why the gazebo *needs* moving, apart from the need to accommodate the soccer field.

Identified issues with the gazebo in its current location are lack of ADA accessibility (see p. 25), sun in the eyes of performers, and noise impacts to the neighborhood. The ADA issues, obviously, can be corrected at any location. Sun in the eyes of performers could be corrected by adding some “visor” type features to the current gazebo; flipping the orientation risks putting the sun in the eyes of audiences. (See Technical Advisory Committee comments at 8/9/10 PAC meeting, Appendix B at p. 63.) Advocates for moving the gazebo have assured the public that audiences will be fine in the new location, but have offered no evidence for this other than “eyeballing it.” Noise impacts *could* be improved by good acoustical design in a new location that would direct sound the other way, or *could* be made worse by greater proximity to houses on the park's quieter west and south sides. Unfortunately, while a lot of lay people with no background in sound engineering have offered opinions on this point, there is no technical evidence one way or the other.

Public involvement results indicate overall opposition to moving the gazebo, although the question has not always been asked in a straightforward way:

- △ The second round of public comment, which asked the public about various options for moving the gazebo, showed only tepid (under 50%) support for moving it to the south-central location and no support for moving it anywhere else. By far the biggest public comment on the gazebo was “no change.” (See Master Plan Appendix C at p. 89.)

- ▲ Neighbors to the south and west of the park, on SE 88th Avenue and Steele Street, almost unanimously signed a petition opposing any relocation of the gazebo, on grounds of increased noise levels from it being closer to their homes. (Petition is attached to this testimony as an exhibit.)
- ▲ Participants in the Listening Session on “Community Spaces,” held 10/28/10, almost unanimously opposed relocation of the gazebo for multiple reasons, including increased noise, inconvenient access to parking lot, worse wheelchair access, and sun in audiences' eyes. (See FLP notes from Listening Sessions.)
- ▲ The final round of public comment, although it did not ask directly about moving the gazebo or provide the public with a measurable option for commenting on this issue, did result in some write-in comments addressing gazebo location. We note that of those supporting Option A (which moved the gazebo), almost nobody liked this *because* it moved the gazebo. Whereas those supporting Option B (which didn't move the gazebo) cited keeping the gazebo where it is as their biggest reason for supporting this plan. (See Master Plan Appendix C at pp. 108-109.)

The PAC, then was left with a dilemma: relocating the soccer field allows for a good thing that the public really wants (more continuous garden space in the park's central section), but requires something the public really doesn't want (moving the gazebo). In the PAC's final meeting on 12/16/10, Friends of Lents Park advocated going back to the drawing board for a creative solution to this dilemma. A majority of PAC members disagreed, and voted to adopt the configuration which appears in the final Site Concept Plan (see p. 40). FLP believes this decision was made in disregard of public sentiments, but recognizes it was the PAC's prerogative to vote as they did.

At this stage in the process, revisiting the PAC's decision does not seem practicable, but the neighborhood's concerns can be noted and taken into account in the next stage of the process. Before finalizing any schematic plans for relocation of the gazebo, expert technical input should be sought as to issues of design and exact location. Professional sound engineers should determine which location and configuration will best direct sound away from the maximum number of residences. Professionals qualified to measure the angle of the sun should determine which location and orientation will be most optimal for performers and audiences alike.

With the overall budget for Master Plan implementation projected to reach \$13 million, with a “soft cost allowance” of 30% for architect and engineer design fees (see p. 125), we believe the resources can be found for these studies to be done.

Neighborhood residents continue to feel disrespected by this aspect of the public involvement (one neighbor walked out of the final PAC meeting), and this attention to their concerns will go a long way towards healing these wounds and achieving greater neighborhood “buy-in” to the overall Master Plan.

2. Skate Spot: Friends of Lents Park supports the location of the “skate spot” shown in the final Site Concept Plan, which is a location we advocated for based on public input. However, we are concerned that the Master Plan as written does not do enough to protect trees in the siting of the skate spot. The final vote of the PAC adopted this location, *on the condition that tree removal be minimized*. The final Master Plan leaves this critical language out, both in the text itself and in the City's minutes of the PAC's final meeting (see FLP Commentary on Master Plan).

Friends of Lents Park has done our own visual assessment of the area between Walker Stadium and the east parking lot, and believes that a skate spot can be sited there without the need for tree removal. We acknowledge we are not engineers, that others have disagreed with us on this point, and that the truth may be somewhere in the middle. However, we urge the City Council to give assurances that in future schematic phases of this plan, every effort will be made to avoid tree removal in the siting of the skate spot.

3. Community Mural: The new Site Concept Plan would remove the wall adjacent to the tennis court, currently used for tennis practice and “wall ball.” In the initial survey, the public rated wall ball as one of the least important features of the park (see Master Plan Appendix C at p. 75). This sport was then slated to be removed from the park, without asking the public specifically about this decision but without any particular outcry being raised against it.

The other side of the “wall ball wall” is a different story. It contains a mural painted by community youth. This mural is important to the community and has never been tagged by graffiti, suggesting that local youth feel a sense of ownership in it. The public was never asked any direct question about this mural, but many spontaneous comments have been made supporting its preservation. (See for example, public comments at 7/12/10 PAC meeting, Master Plan Appendix B at p. 59.)

Friends of Lents Park supports the provision that “PP&R will look for other opportunities for a community mural in the park” (Master Plan, p. 39). The more art the better! But we seek assurances from City Council that the existing mural will not be sent to the landfill, but that a new home will be found for it, perhaps as part of a renovated gazebo or other new construction in the park. “Out with the old and in with the new” should not be our attitude when it comes to public art.

Lessons for the future from this master planning process: Throughout the Master Planning process, Friends of Lents Park has had numerous concerns about the adequacy of public involvement. Almost all of our concerns have ultimately been resolved, but that does not necessarily mean that “all's well that ends well.” While the very fact of this Master Plan has brought encouragement and hope to the neighborhood, some of the ways in which public involvement was conducted have exacerbated existing tensions and have even widened the gulf of distrust between the neighborhood and City Hall. It is important for lessons to be learned from this process.

Rather than restate or summarize our issues with the process, FLP would like to offer some suggestions for the future. We would also like to thank Commissioner Fish and his staff, for providing leadership at key moments that greatly improved the process and helped bring it to a successful conclusion.

1. Composition and role of advisory committee: When assembling an advisory committee to oversee a planning process that is so specific to one neighborhood, as this one was, it is very important to recruit from neighborhood residents, not just from identified “stakeholder groups.” Here the PAC consisted of a diverse mix of stakeholder representatives (drawn from the neighborhood, SE Portland in general, park users and the overall park system), but people who actually lived anywhere near the park were under-represented. (In making this point, we mean no disparagement of PAC members, who worked very hard and demonstrated great concern for the park's well-being.)

It is also important to involve the advisory committee in the hands-on work of designing the public involvement process, as they know best what techniques will work to reach their particular neighborhood and community. Too often in this planning process, the PAC was simply handed a set of procedures and told “this is how it's going to be.” Too often the PAC was asked to *stand in for* the community (i.e., give their own personal opinions, on the theory that these would also be the community's opinions) instead of *represent the community* (i.e., find ways to bring in the viewpoints of as wide a group as possible).

Clarity and transparency about the PAC's role is also important. Too often here, the roles were not well defined, or changed without notice. For example, the PAC was shown the first three concept maps and asked what they liked and didn't like, but was told that they could not make any changes to the maps before they were shown to the public. Later one change was made, prior to the start of public comment, in response to concerns of a PAC member. Still later, City staff told PAC members that “You have always been responsible for the maps; you approved them,” which does not seem to have been true.

2. Hold in-depth discussions up front: One of the best aspects of public involvement here were the three “Listening Sessions,” in which the public was invited to have in-depth discussions about different aspects of the park. Unfortunately, these did not take place until late October, over five months into the process. By that time, the next-to-final maps had already been voted on and drawn up, and the comment form for the final round of public comment had already been finalized. This made it unnecessarily difficult for the complex, qualitative data from these conversations to be assimilated into the final plan.

Here again, FLP does not hold to a philosophy of “all's well that ends well.” Yes, the Listening Sessions happened, and most of what was said ultimately got listened to. But tens of thousands of dollars of our tax money were wasted in the months leading up to this point, in conducting surveys that didn't ask the right questions and drawing maps of things the public didn't want.

In-depth conversations should take place in the initial stages of public involvement, not as an afterthought. Although the Listening Sessions were excellent, FLP suggests going beyond the format of facilitated discussions, and actually involving the public in map-making. If park features are going to be shuffled around, why not have tables where the public can sit down and move pieces of paper on a map (or some computerized alternative)?

3. Have a process for public review of final document, not just the map: Extensive public input went into the final Site Concept Map, which was voted on by the PAC in a meeting attended by the public. The PAC was then told, “that’s it, you can go now,” while the City’s contractor went to write up their decisions. The text produced by the contractor was then released in “final” form for City Council adoption. There should be some interim step that allows for public review of the final document before it goes to Council, perhaps one more meeting of the advisory committee.

Conclusion: The fact that Lents Park is getting an updated Master Plan is a sign of how much things have changed for the better in our neighborhood. Not only will this plan put our community in line for a fair share of resources to make improvements, it will also help protect the park from opportunists who might wish to use it for their own ends. Lents residents, who have historically felt neglected and disenfranchised by city government, are gaining new hope from this process. During the Listening Sessions, one 51-year resident stated that this Master Plan is “the first positive thing the city has ever done for Lents Park.”

However, this process has also shown how far we still have to go, in some respects, towards bridging the gap between the Lents neighborhood and City Hall. Many residents of the park’s south and west edges, in particular, continue to feel disrespected around the issue of relocating the gazebo.

Friends of Lents Park thanks all participants in this process, Commissioner Fish and the rest of the Council, PP&R staff, our local Urban Renewal Advisory Committee, all members of the PAC, and most importantly, the public. We commend you for your efforts and look forward to working with you in the future.

To: Portland Parks Department
Portland City Council
Friends of Lents
Lents Homeowners Association
PDC

September 4, 2010

We the undersigned strongly oppose any plan to relocate the Gazebo to any other location in Lents Park. We the undersigned will be negatively impacted in all aspects of our livability due to the location of our homes and the boundaries of the park. Moving the Gazebo closer to residential boundaries negatively impacts both our mental and physical health. Presently we are subjected to noise levels coming from the Gazebo that cannot be controlled even by shutting the windows in our homes. We also strongly object to being subjected to the religious beliefs of others in the privacy of our homes. It is virtually impossible to sit outside and enjoy your backyard without being bombarded with noise so loud you cannot ignore it. (Sunday Parkways is a good example) We want the community to enjoy Lents Park but we also want the of the Portland Parks department to consider the venues they approve with respect to the homeowners.

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