

Personal Testimony on South Park Blocks Master Plan

To: Ted Wheeler
Joann Hardesty
Mavis Mapps
Carmen Rubio

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For 15 years my wife and I have been residents of Downtown Portland, living near the South Park Blocks. Since we live in a high-rise building, the Park is our closest outdoor space and we visit it frequently year-round; to visit the Farmer's Market, to walk our dog, to meet friends for walks and runs and to enjoy a respite from indoors. So do students from PSU, visitors to the Art Museum, wedding parties and out of town visitors, many international. We are joined by the many residents of surrounding low-income housing projects, churchgoers on Sundays and concert and play goers before and after productions. Children from day care facilities are frequent during weather breaks. On hot days families come to lay on the grass and get cool under the shade of the trees. In the fall, we go to enjoy the fall color and the industrious squirrels. In the winter, we can walk and enjoy the low sun on a clear cold day when the trees are bare. It is a place where church groups feed the unsheltered, who sit on park benches to eat. Occasionally, we witness ad hoc music sessions and, regrettably to me and my dog, skateboarding displays. The Blocks have been a meeting place for Direct Action Protesters, and have borne the brunt of graffiti and vandalism. It is a people's park for all manner of users. Sometimes uses conflict, but they always will, irrespective of design. This is part of living in the Downtown of a major metropolitan area. The beauty of it is that it works remarkably well most of the time almost 150 years after it was first conceived.

Is the Park perfect? No. We have lost some old trees, and the remainder need careful and enhanced maintenance and occasional replacement. The climate is changing, and that will likely have an effect on the existing landscape and whatever we replace it with. But the South Park Blocks offer exceptional utility to many diverse users and is a year-round magnet for residents, workers and visitors alike. It has also attracted a small army of willing volunteers, who under the direction of Parks, pull weeds, pick up twigs and dead head roses. My wife and I volunteer to keep it and surrounding blocks trash free. We pick up after our pet, and unfortunately others' pets too. This level of community involvement is what cities should celebrate, as it leverages city workers and makes bond measures passable.

When contemplating what to do with the South Park Blocks for the next 150 years it is important to consider who the South Park Blocks serve today. This SW quadrant of Downtown is the most densely populated area in the who City, and one of the most demographically diverse. It is, in a very real sense, the backyard for the people who live in this quadrant, who have no other outdoor space for respite, unlike in suburban areas where

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parks serve other purposes. The new Master Plan aims to “activate” the Park Blocks to attract more visitation Downtown. Attracting more visitation Downtown, especially in light of the pandemic’s potential impact on office usage Downtown, is a worthwhile effort, but not at the expense of those already living in the most densely populated area of the entire City who have no other alternative for a neighborhood park. Much of Downtown is almost completely void of residential uses. Some portions of Downtown, like the area around Lowndale, Chapman and Schrunk Squares, get minimal usage much of the time. Some, like the North end of Downtown, have no parks except the abandoned O’Bryant Square. **I would like to see the goal for Downtown to be the creation of a 24-hour City, with residential uses for a diverse demographic integrated with commercial, retail and cultural and open space uses throughout, not just in the SW and SE quadrants. That is how to create a safe and livable Downtown.**

The planning for the Master Plan for the Park Blocks occurred before and in the middle of the pandemic. As such, it did not consider all the issues it should have. Nor did it get the attention it should have. There are many unknowns remaining coming out of the pandemic which may significantly re-define Downtown. Those will play out over the next several years. **Since we are looking to make changes that may have a very significant impact on stakeholders, we need to pause a bit and see who those stakeholders will be. Let’s put the process of re-inventing the South Park Blocks on hold and start a more transparent and inclusive level of public involvement to ensure the final plan has the desired effect.**

And, why, at this moment in time when we are facing an increase in gun violence, homelessness, social inequity and lack of resources to help disadvantaged communities within our city, are we devoting this amount of scarce park resources to re-making something that currently works and is popular all over the city? This is not good evidence of what we have been saying our priorities are. We are in the middle of the process to “Re-think Public Safety” and provide greater equity of opportunity throughout the city to stave off the conditions that over the last 20-30 years helped contribute to the social problems we see today. **Certainly, there are places in disadvantaged neighborhoods throughout the city to improve or create new parks or related services. Or if the focus is on Downtown, why not work with the private sector to create new park space Downtown in areas of Downtown devoid of them or redevelop O’Bryant Square which is a useless and graffiti covered eyesore.**

Please do not approve this new Master Plan and its implementation. Approval will be seen as tone deaf to the many of us who actively are supporting the City’s efforts to Re-think Public Safety and address Climate Change. It also has a good chance of missing its intended goal.

Richard Perkins

richardperkinspdx@gmail.com

(503) 313-4594