Notes on Pedro Park Work Group Meeting for June 17, 2021

Notes taken by Nancy Fischer

Present: Meritt, Nancy, Jon, Nicole, Gina, Jean, Julie, Judie, Peg, Emma, Kady

Today’s meeting mostly consisted of a question and answer session between our working group and members of City Planning.

The first set of questions concerned the Fitzgerald Park Precinct Plan, which was adopted in 2006, and amended in 2010 (to align with the 10th Street Station Light Rail Area Plan).

Precinct plans are part of a larger plan, The Downtown Development Strategy. There are downtown planning themes like common spaces, small, walkable, green spaces, attracting millennials and preparing for more residents, and thinking of downtown Saint Paul as an economic anchor for the East Metro.

The Fitzgerald Park Precinct Plan provides for:

* Diverse, mixed-use, human-scale, first floor uses
* Activity at street level to provide eyes on the street
* Preservation of historical buildings, and historic character of neighborhood; new development that is compatible with what is already in the area
* Pedestrian-friendly
* Connections to skyways, and other modes of moving such as cycling, transit and car use. (includes transit-oriented development)
* A central green space that is visible, safe, and well-maintained
* Strong identity and sense of place
* Spaces to gather and share information, whether those spaces are city owned (public) or businesses (private)

There were questions about how this precinct plan fits into the overall development plans for downtown Saint Paul, as well as how the precinct plan is used by the city.

Question: How is a precinct plan used?

The Precinct Plan is used to evaluate new developments and zoning requests. It should be referenced for its high level principles. Such plans guide expenditures of public funds and they help guide private developers. They are used to secure grants and outside funding. The Precinct Plan is adopted policy so this is what is used until another policy is adopted and in place.

Questions: When does the plan get updated or retired? Do the priorities of the precinct plan carry forward with the new Comprehensive plan or do we start over?

The newest downtown plan is the 2020 Comprehensive Plan for Saint Paul. The Downtown Development Strategy needs to be updated. The current Fitzgerald Park Precinct Plan remains relevant until a new plan is passed, but there probably is not a current need to update the precinct plan because it seems like it’s already in alignment with the 2020 Comprehensive Plan. The new Comprehensive Plan highlights affordable housing and businesses along transit lines. Kady said that nothing is inconsistent with comprehensive plan.

Questions about Pedro Park: Does Pedro Park stay the same size or can it expand in some direction? Are both of these options consistent with the Precinct Plan? Also, whether the Public Safety Annex (PSA) stays or goes – does either outcome fit the Precinct Plan?

Yes in both cases (that the park could in theory expand or remain the same, that the PSA could stay up or come down). That area was recommended for a Park. The Precinct Plan calls for preservation, but the PSA does not have a historical designation.

Questions and Discussion of the Relationship between Pedro Park and the Public Safety Annex:

Nicolle Goodman:

* In terms of sequencing this entire process, we need to know what to do with the PSA first.
* In planning for the park, the sale of the PSA building is currently tied to the development of the quarter-acre park – the PSA sale would fund the development of the park, which has already been designed according to Parks and Rec’s planning process (it is not the current design – see the Pedro Park website). The sale of the PSA is meant to build the 2018 design that occurred when Ackerberg was looking at the PSA – that park design mock-up is 90 percent complete.
* There is no huge attachment historically to the PSA building. It costs a lot to tear it down, and the sale of the building was meant to pay for developing the park. If you instead tear down the building, you need to double the funds - you need $ to pay for the demolition of the building and additional funds to develop the park. But tearing it down is on the table.
* City engagement would be needed on weighing the costs of tearing down the PSA, potential funding sources, and uses of the building that would be good for the neighborhood. How can the building be an asset? How can it contribute to the neighborhood?
* If the building is torn down instead of sold or reused, then what is the funding source?
* Nicolle suggests that we create a matrix with different scenarios with different costs and different potential funding sources. For example, Scenario 1 is sell PSA and use funds of sale to develop the park plan for a quarter-acre park that is 90 percent designed. Scenario 2 is tear down the PSA and expand the park – pay for tear down, pay for new park design and pay for expansion. Scenario 3 might be tear down the building, expand the park, and restart the park design process as well (paying for new landscape architectural designs). In each scenario, the costs change and more funding sources must be developed.

Nicolle suggested we talk with policy makers to see how they feel about it.

Question: What is the leeway we as a group have to work in where what we do and say can actually affect the future of the park?

Community engagement around the PSA building would occur in a Request For Proposals (RFP) process. Determining what are desirable uses are part of that. We would let developers know that there’s a grocery store across the street. We would find out what is not desirable. The City owns the building and selects the buyer, so that means we have a lot of control. We evaluate the feasibility of different options as part of the RFP process. We do not have to accept any of the proposals that we receive. We could put an RFP out there and see what we get and where we’re at. Otherwise, we will never know.

Nicolle would like us to go through the drafting process of the RFP. We would probably ask for letters of interest (from potential developers) rather than make them go through *pro forma* renderings.

Question: Have you considered what increased property tax revenue a park could bring in terms of raising property values of residences that surround the park?

* The Public Safety Annex currently does not produce tax revenue and if it were developed, it would produce revenue.

Question: Could Pedro Park expand in a different direction such as the parking lots that surround it and the PSA?

* Office of City Planning has same question – will try to find out prospects of nearby properties

Questions about funding: Can we find a new source of funding (other than sale of PSA) and build that into the design of the park? Is there some fund for parks that can be used?

There is never enough money and there’s not a big parks fund that can pay for something like this. We would need to figure out how to raise the funds.

Other business:

Julie, Merritt and Jon have been creating a spreadsheet with our group’s goals and a schedule. The idea is to turn our comments into action points.

We need to start delegating tasks rather than relying too much on Julie. Such tasks would include meeting with someone from a City office that has info relevant to our discussions, filling out government forms, meeting with potential funding organizations, etc.

Likewise, we have drafted interview questions for relational meetings for the purpose of community engagement. Please interview 2 people by our next meeting which is now scheduled for **Thursday, July 15th from 4:00 – 5:30pm** [ Are we meeting via Zoom or in-person?]