

A statement from the leadership teams of Dix306 and Friends of Dorothea Dix Park

Jan. 25, 2019

We welcome the changes to the draft Master Plan for Dix Park as outlined by city staff (Kate Pearce memo, Jan. 22) and consider them a positive response to our concerns. We look forward to reviewing the changes when they're written and to reading the revised plan when it's available, which we're told will be by early next week.

Our concerns focused on the implicit and often explicit direction of the plan toward considerable private development inside the park, including such proposals as a hotel, restaurants, bars, a food court, a brewery, private offices and private residential uses such as condominiums or apartments. These uses were proposed as methods of "revenue generation" to pay for park operations, including the upkeep of 30 buildings that formerly were a part of the Dix Hospital complex.

The changes, as presented in the Jan. 22 memo, are meant to clarify that the Master Plan is neutral on the key questions of how many buildings should be reused and for what purposes. All references to "revenue generation" save one are to be struck from the text. (The one remaining will list it as an option, one of many, for funding the park.)

The animating spirit of the park should not be how much money it makes. Rather, it should be about the legacy of the land, of the African-Americans who worked it, and of Dorothea Dix, a pioneer for the humane treatment of persons with mental challenges. Dix Park should be a place of beauty, inspiration and learning about our past and our future.

In this vein, we believe that a thoughtful reuse of the two nearly original Dix Hospital buildings—the so-called east and west wings which follow the A.J. Davis design—can focus the park on themes of health, wellness and equity. The Davis wings could house a museum, exhibition space, a multimedia library or scientific center devoted to the health of the mind. Cafes and other concessions that support the park's mission may fit there or in other buildings, as the plan suggests.

On the other hand, a private hotel with a rooftop bar, in either of the Davis wings, would dishonor the Dix legacy profoundly.

We also are assured that the revised Master Plan, when issued, will no longer recommend that open tracts of land in the park be "reserved for future buildings."

Instead, these places, along Lake Wheeler Road near the proposed new entrance, will be designated "future study areas" only.

The context of the earlier recommendation, and discussions about it at public meetings, made it clear that these "future buildings" could be mixed-use

developments of private housing and office space on parkland leased to private developers.

We would prefer that the Master Plan drop this idea entirely and state that no part of the Dix property should be leased or sold for private use. However, withdrawing it as a recommendation is a step forward. We will continue to oppose any effort to generate revenue for Dix Park by cannibalizing it with private-use leases of land or buildings.

Again, we want to express our appreciation to Kate Pearce and everyone who's worked on the Master Plan for taking our concerns seriously and responding to them in a constructive way.