

Meeting Minutes
Congress Square Redesign Study Group
September 17, 2014 4:00 to 6:00
Room 24, City Hall

Call to order 4:06pm

Welcome and Introductions

In attendance: Co-chair Kevin Donoghue, Co-chair David Marshall, Rosanne Graef, Frank Turek, Alex Landry, Peter Bass, Hilary Bassett, Pandora LaCasse, Bruce Wennerstrom, Kristen Levesque, Bree LaCasse, Steve Hewins, Councilor Jon Hinck, Christine Cantwell (representing PSA), Alex Jaegerman (staff), Caitlin Cameron (staff)

Not in attendance: Jack Lufkin, Lynn Tillotson, Jaime Parker

Review and accept meeting minutes

Landry moved, Graef seconded [13-0 passes, Turek, Lufkin, Tillotson, and Parker absent]

Review of data and Presentation of two options (staff)

Attachments:

1. *Memorandum – Staff evaluation of 2 redesign options*
Includes: Design program, Summary of Needs/Opportunities, Vision Statement
2. *Examples: Option 1*
3. *Examples: Option 2*

Staff presented the contents of the meeting materials including a description of the program needs and vision statement for Congress Square. Staff then went on to present precedents and examples of existing spaces representing the possibilities for each option. Cost estimates based on square feet of hardscape, landscape, and extensive/intensive roof landscaping were presented based on staff analysis of numbers from various consultants. Finally, the presentation concluded with an opportunities/challenges analysis pointing out the potential limitations and opportunities of each option.

CSRSG members were then given a chance to respond to the presentation.

Levesque asked who pays for the structural reinforcing of the roof and the egress. Jaegerman responded and Wennerstrom confirmed that any costs associated with the park would be borne by the City.

Graef asked staff whether they knew of any comparable ownership model as is being proposed for the event center/rooftop park option including maintenance and liability. Staff responded that they were not aware of a comparable example. The closest example is privately-owned public spaces where the property is owned privately but open to the public. In most cases, it is not the City that is responsible for maintenance of the space and does not own the space.

Hinck mentioned St. Mary's Square in San Francisco as another example of a public park that is on a roof. He asked what the ownership and maintenance arrangement was in that case. Staff did not know the answer to that but did know the example and that it was a public park in some form.

Hewins reminded the group that regardless of ownership, Portland Downtown District (PDD) would have the responsibility of maintenance for Congress Square spaces.

Hewins asked how much of the existing square feet of Congress Square Park would be elevated in the Option 2. Jaegerman responded that the current plaza space is 14,800 sf, the event center would occupy 10,000 sf. Wennerstrom confirmed that the event center is 10,000 sf.

Hewins followed up asking whether there would be a ground level open space component as well. Staff responded yes, most likely at the Congress Street side.

Marshall asked whether the ground level open space was included in the estimate. Jaegerman confirmed and referred the group to the 7.21.14 Council memo table which shows the plaza surface costs. Cameron reminded the group that these costs do not include features such as water, art, furniture, etc.

Marshall stated that it was important to consider the total costs as a comparison.

B. LaCasse expressed concern that one source of the cost estimate numbers was coming from the architect hired by Rockbridge and who is designing the event center project.

Marshall asked whether there could be an ADA accessible ramp up to the rooftop space. Cameron responded that it is not clear whether there is enough space on the site to accommodate that but it is possible.

Bassett asked how the plaza/park schemes fit into the whole square design. Cameron and Jaegerman responded that the urban design needs and shared space components need to be met either way, with either scheme and that it is important to keep in mind that this is a smaller piece of a large whole.

Turek arrives at 5:07pm

Donoghue asked whether either option works with the proposed square concept. Cameron responded that each option could be made to work with the square design but that there is likely a need for a built element of some kind whether it's the event center or a kiosk/restrooms, an armature for projection, etc.

Landry asked how we define "active use." Landry stated that he thinks the active use piece of the project is really challenging. Landry did not consider the event center to be an active edge and does not provide a true active edge. Cameron responded that there are different degrees of activity and that staff considers the event center an active edge but agree that it is not as active as a retail use, for example but more active than the current conditions. Marshall asked staff whether they thought the hotel entrance would be considered an active edge in which case he agreed with Landry that the park space already has an edge that is a hotel entrance and would not necessarily make the new space any more active.

Marshall asked staff which option, based on their expertise, best accommodated the needs and desires of the community as expressed through the data generated during the visioning process. Cameron responded that Option 1 would be better suited to accommodate accessibility, physical and visual, and creating the perception of an open and accessible space which would be more difficult to accomplish with an elevated park.

Public Comment

Barry Hoffman: Is there a rendering? (Jaegerman responded no, that was not part of the task assigned to staff). It's premature to ask who will pay for what. Go for what you want.

Patrick Costin: Are the needs of Rockbridge/the hotel considered here? (Wennerstrom responded that yes, they have been present for two years and have made their needs known). So, it appears there is no room for play with the needs of the event center.

Unknown name: Clarify the statement in the staff report about accommodating restrooms etc. (Cameron responded that with a built component, whether the event center or otherwise, program needs such as restrooms and storage are more likely and easily to be accommodated. Without a design, this is a possibility only).

Ian Jacobs: The cost estimates are problematic and likely too low. The Lincoln Center, for example, was \$15.6 million.

Don Elliot: Some examples given are not comparable context to what we have here – the change of grade on the site is a challenge and the programmatic implication of the current spatial configuration is in support of planned, staged events, but hinders casual use.

Anne Pringle: Please clarify the statement about the hotel entrance as an opportunity for an active edge. Would it be publicly accessible? When the plaza was created originally, the intention was for that entrance to have a 24/7 aspect. Also, our parks already have hours and are open from dusk until dawn – it would not be unreasonable for the rooftop option to have similar hours.

Patrick Costin: I would urge the CSRSG to use the design team to help evaluate each option before making a decision with cost estimates and concrete concepts therefore giving the group a real sense of the value that would be gotten from either option. The time that we as a city have already invested in this place means that this decision deserves a thorough evaluation.

Evaluation of two options

Members of the CSRSG provided their opinion on the options and how to proceed.

Cantwell stated that the Portland Society for Architecture appreciates that the referendum brought the park space back into the public realm. She is equally open to both options at this point and the PSA believes the space could be successfully designed either way. She further stated that design is how all of these things, such as program and needs become form. This is more than just a checklist but goes beyond these programmatic concerns. She then asked how the city can create capacity for public/private partnership and legal models to do it right.

Wennerstrom stated that we have work that was begun by KMDG and that we should keep going with that work to see what comes out of it. He felt that he needs to see the two concepts to make a decision. He also reminded the group to keep the sale of the parcel money in mind as an income source. There would also be income in property taxes to the City for a new building.

Turek felt that within the existing plaza footprint the roof option does not fulfill the assessed needs. The existing challenges are design challenges that can be met and solved but the option with the roof does not address all the community needs.

B. LaCasse agreed that the challenges presented by the ground level park can be met through design solutions but the challenges in an elevated park are inherent in the design = creating challenges and problems. Safety and access barriers are important considerations here – over the course of the summer Friends of Congress Square Park have observed events where several people in wheelchairs attended – they would not have been able to observe and feel included had they needed to find a way to get up to the roof.

Hewins commended the impressive improvements and changes that have resulted from the Friends of Congress Square Park so far. PDD has the responsibility to maintain the space regardless. He supports either direction but favors an option that generates economic development with the event center. He therefore leans to the opportunities presented by the event center, the income to the City, and the money from the sale. Hewins also mentioned the Spanish Steps as an example of an elevated public space that is very successful and well-used. With the roof option, the PDD would have additional money/income for maintenance of the public spaces. Finally, he felt that there is an opportunity to unite people with the hybrid option.

P. LaCasse responded to the staff memo statements about the proportion and size saying that the proportion of the space is 1:4 which is a good proportion and that she feels it is not too large. The Post Office Park example in Boston is a good example of what we could aim for. The rooftop has a lack of ebb and flow, flexibility, street presence. A public open space is successful when people see people. Public Art is another important component – art can activate edges, is interactive, creates identity, and is placemaking. The elevated park would limit all of these possibilities. Rooftop parks are a trend but most public open spaces are on the ground level for a reason and we need to make a timeless space. She would vote for Option 1.

Hinck agreed that the success of public space is a priority. The best outcome is if this could be combined with the event center but was skeptical about the cost of that option. He was not convinced design couldn't solve the access and visibility issues. Design concepts are needed for each option from the design team - designs that minimize the costs based on our limited resources. He asked whether the event center could start lower in the ground to create less elevation to be reached. St. Mary's Square in San Francisco is a good example of a rooftop public space that has a free flow. Requests that we spend as little as possible on concepts but the group needs real design and dollars to make a decision.

Bassett agreed with the PSA in that Greater Portland Landmarks is open to either strategy. The quality of design and relationship to the entire square/intersection as well as the historic context should be considered in this decision.

Bass stated that he still thinks the event center would be good for the arts district. He respects the outcome of the referendum – the question to be asked is which option fulfills the desire of the public. He didn't think the elevated park would be an

easy solution to meet the desires/vision of the public. Both situations are design problems but we are better with what is tried and true. Therefore, he stated a preference for Option 1 but need professional design to make the decision.

Landry repeated that active edges remain a top concern. The elevated park would be more difficult and expensive and difficult to get what we want out of the program. He agreed it is a design problem but that it could be a lot of money to get a good solution. He reminded the group of weighing the value of each option and felt that the elevated option would bring value to fewer people, fewer people would access it and be served and it would be less accessible needing to be closed at night. He felt Option 1 would give what we wanted for the value.

Graef stated her concerns include the cost and legal arrangement. She pointed out that as density increases on the peninsula access to neighborhood green spaces becomes more important. Great strides were already made through Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper options. She supported phasing to get us to the end solution but that is not possible with the elevated option and it is also less reversible. Finally, she concluded that the rooftop option eliminates large gathering spaces.

Levesque stated that the highest and best used is desired. From the PMA's perspective, this area is the front yard of the museum and its visual appearance is important to the image of the city and the square and the museum. She wanted to see concept designs.

Next Steps

Donoghue asked staff how to meet the need of the CSRSG to proceed. Jaegerman responded that he would recommend using KMDG as our contracted design team to produce conceptual designs for each option. The question is how detailed the designs would need to be to make the decision.

Marshall pointed out there is limited time and the CSRSG would need to meet once more.

B. LaCasse asked how the CSRSG members could be involved with the design. Donoghue responded that it would be another meeting for the CSRSG to weigh the options based on the desire expressed at this meeting to have visual representation with costs.

Marshall asked staff to communicate with the design team about the schedule and how to proceed with concepts. He further echoed Councilor Donoghue's assessment there was not a clear consensus on direction to take.

The CSRSG directs staff to work with the Councilors and design team to come up with a process around design and cost estimates and report back to the CSRSG.

Marshall moved, Hewins seconded.

Bassett wanted to clarify the staff direction as a call for conceptual designs. Jaegerman responded that staff will have to talk with KMDG about the cost to do this work and the schedule.

Vote taken on the proposed direction to staff [10-4 passes, Landry, B. LaCasse, P. LaCasse, and Turek opposed. Lufkin, Tillotson, and Parker absent]

Meeting adjourned 6:09pm