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Regional Planning Commission

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Sycamore
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December 2, 1999

Hamilton County Board of County Commissioners
Room 603 County Administration Building
138 East Court Street
Cincinnati, Ohio 45202

Subject: The Banks – RPC Findings and Recommendations related to The Report of the Riverfront Advisors Commission

Honorable Board:

This report is in response to your request for the Regional Planning Commission to “study and report their findings regarding the consistency of the Riverfront Advisors plan with regional and localized planning efforts, constraints, and requirements.”

This response is based on the discussion and opinions of Regional Planning Commission members rather than rigorous research and evaluation. The City and County have already invested heavily and wisely in exhaustive analysis by a multitude of renowned consultants. We’ve made no attempt to duplicate any of that work. The plans for the riverfront have also received daily review and refinement by city/county staff, periodic review and oversight by the Steering Committee, and outstanding research and refinement by the Riverfront Advisors and their consultants. The need for additional review may be questionable. At the same time, we recognize that cities and downtowns defy scientific assessments. They cannot be reduced to scientific formulas since urbanism is an art rather than a science. It’s also important to recognize that the complex, multidimensional urban fabric of a vibrant city is not created by a collection of mega-projects or visitor attractions. Instead organic growth has created the most successful cities. History also tells us that a “good” city evolves on the basis of local characteristics and design principles, not by mere chance. With this in mind, as citizen users of the city and participants in the planning process for individual projects as well as the region, we offer the following observations and opinions.

The following eight urban design principles recommended by Urban Design Associates (in the Central Riverfront Urban Design and Stadium Siting Concept Plan) were accepted by Hamilton County and the City of Cincinnati in April 1997:

- Re-establish the city grid to the river.
- Transform existing isolated parks into a riverfront parks system
- Remove Fort Washington Way as a barrier to the riverfront
- Create centrally located multipurpose parking.
- Preserve sites which are linked to downtown, the riverfront, the stadiums, and parking for economic development.
- Link attractions to the downtown retail/office core.
- Construct an LRT or parking shuttle to link neighborhoods and parking with downtown Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky.
- Preserve the view from downtown to the river and from the river to downtown

Using these guidelines as evaluation criteria, we find that the Riverfront Advisors plan largely achieves each of the design principles. However, the real strength of the Advisors plan is that it identifies and corrects a glaring deficiency in the foundation principles – our initial guidelines for creating a successful riverfront. The critical area of improvement involves housing and creation of a real neighborhood.

Housing is the most important element of The Banks development. This is recognized by the Riverfront Advisors on page 13 of their report. The Banks development creates a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week neighborhood, year round. The planning emphasis has appropriately shifted from visitors and attraction gimmicks such as virtual reality arcades to residents and real neighborhoods. This shift will likely not reduce visitor appeal or return on public investment, however, since it is well documented that sustainable tourism is actually related to creation of convivial places where people like to live. Pedestrians are the catalyst which makes the essential qualities of communities meaningful. The housing component of the Banks development is essential to creating a real neighborhood and a pedestrian environment.

The synergistic result of compliance with the eight design principles as well as the refinements recommended by the Riverfront Advisors is the creation of a front porch for our city (a front porch to the world) and a reinvention of a focal point for the entire region.

We recommend acceptance of each of the Riverfront Advisor's ten recommendations as well as additional consideration and refinement of certain aspects of the plan for The Banks related to the following nine concerns.

1. Connection of East and West Public Realm. The Reds stadium by its scale, mass, limited use and inward orientation is not naturally supportive of public goals for connecting the city to what should be its greatest asset – the river. Nor is it naturally supportive of the goal to connect the public realm on the east and west side of the stadium. The external pedestrian environment of the Reds baseball stadium may be the greatest potential threat to the success of the Banks development and therefore the element requiring the most sensitive and innovative design. The stadium will be located approximately in the center of the public realm of Cincinnati's riverfront. The two stadiums are often referred to as "bookends". However, the Reds stadium is located as a bookend in the middle of the shelf. Without unusual innovation in design, this massive footprint could sever the eastern and western parts of the public realm and in turn continue to sever the park developments east of the stadium from the rest of the city core. An east/west pedestrian connection is further challenged by the proposed sequence and of monolithic structures (Reds ballpark, First Star Center and a new parking garage) along the riverfront. These neighbors to the riverfront parks east of the Reds Ballpark must be transformed into a pedestrian gateway connecting the parks.

The façade of the baseball stadium and the external pedestrian environment must be designed so that its unusual height and mass are not perceived as a pedestrian obstacle. The scale of this structure cannot be ignored, concealed, or denied. But it should be responsive to and contribute to the larger public goals for the riverfront. Plans proposed by UDA and the Riverfront Advisors to date have not adequately addressed this critical issue. Extraordinary design innovation is needed to deal with the height and mass of the stadium, its adjacency to parkland and the need to be consistent with goals for smaller scale and finer grain of development on adjacent blocks. Assuring a vibrant urban experience around this huge megastructure sitting in the midst of the public waterfront and public parkland is now the most urgent task. If done inappropriately, the consequences will be irreversible for many generations.

2. Connection of CBD to The Banks. A pedestrian friendly environment must be created on north-south streets leading to the riverfront on blocks between Third Street and Fourth Street. Existing facades on these blocks unfortunately consist of “dead space”--parking decks and solid-wall building foundations along the majority of the streetscapes. The blocks between Third Street and Fourth Street lack pedestrian directed elements such as store windows and window displays – an important part of street life and the urban experience. The narrowing of Fort Washington Way certainly improves pedestrian access to the riverfront, but the walk is still encumbered by the sidewalk slope and uninviting pedestrian environment on each block between Third Street and Fourth Street.
3. Connection of Parking to Core Offices. The existing skywalk system has some adverse consequences related to street level retail. Extension of that system in the core area is generally considered inadvisable. Recent focus groups--a sample of potential users--suggest that the skywalk link to the Second Street parking decks is also inadvisable. We concur with this finding if the Advisors’ recommendation related to shifting parking decks to Third Street can be achieved. In the absence of making the Third Street parking decks a reality, the skywalk link should be reconsidered. With all parking decks remaining south of Second Street, the volume of daily pedestrian traffic (during rush hours and evening) as well as the importance of public safety, the amount of inclement weather combined with the slope of sidewalks to the office core, justify future consideration of the skywalk extension. We’d also suggest that the focus group responses may be substantively different if conducted on days when the weather includes snow, ice or rain rather than during the recent “spring-like” fall weather. The “Key Conclusion” of the focus group report--that “Cincinnatians like to complain”...and therefore the skywalk to the new riverfront parking garages is not needed-- was only based on input of about a dozen office workers and is not very credible. This issue requires more rigorous analysis.
4. Adverse Effect of Parking on LRT Ridership. The proposed creation of abundant weekday parking will be counterproductive in growing Light Rail Transit (LRT) system demand. Proliferation of parking garages both takes up

otherwise productive downtown space and encourages excessive traffic. Less available parking encourages transit use. More available parking encourages automobile use. While The Banks proposal allows for LRT (and a transit center), it fails to support LRT. Ideally, support for public transit infrastructure would replace some of the required parking now being planned. In cities where parking is easy, demand for transit doesn't have much chance.

5. Connection of Waters Edge to the City. Successful waterfronts are generally more than a line along the water. The water's edge should ideally find its way into the city to reinforce the connection to the river. The penetrating water features just east of the Roebling Bridge as well as the long-term proposal for the marina, west of the Bengals stadium, are critical elements in connecting the river to the city as opposed to connecting the city to the river. An inviting access to the city from the river is largely different from the current focus on creating a view and access from office towers to the north. This element requires additional attention.
6. Street Names and Identity. Substantial study preceded the decision to call our riverfront neighborhood "The Banks". The Advisors recognized the importance of the name being contemporary, simple, consistent with river heritage, exciting, friendly, and inviting. The name must evoke a sense of place. Similar criteria should be applied to identifying a more appropriate street name for Mehring Way – e.g., First Street, Riverside Drive, Riverfront Parkway, The Banks Parkway, etc.
7. Context within the City. Some controversy exists over the priority of implementing The Banks ahead of revitalizing existing core neighborhoods – that this investment may be at the expense of the downtown core, Backstage, Main Street, Mount Adams and the West End. It can be argued that we should strengthen what exists before adding anything new. What's important, however, is to start where we can – not where we cannot. The momentum and window of opportunity for The Banks is now. The real importance of starting Cincinnati's rebirth with the Banks is that it has the greatest potential for changing the "shape and size of the pie" – not just shifting shares of the existing market.

The Banks development is an important point of departure and certainly fills the biggest gap in the Cincinnati urban experience. However, we must not lose sight of the rest of the picture. Other gaps must be addressed – especially in Over-the-Rhine where a treasury of historical buildings has been dormant too long. The uniqueness of this architectural and historical resource is recognized around the country – but taken for granted (and often viewed as a problem rather than an asset) in Cincinnati and in our region. Downtown and Over-the-Rhine also have holes in the streetwall, like missing teeth—interrupting continuity of street activity.

All the threads of the downtown fabric must be connected. This task cannot be ignored after funding and implementing The Banks. The larger framework of the city must also be repaired or The Banks will begin to destabilize other parts of the

city that have not been favored with such massive public investment. The Banks development is an important start and certainly fills the biggest gap in the Cincinnati urban experience; however, we must not lose sight of the interrelatedness of the rest of the city and the need to mend the entire city fabric.

A related issue is the demand for office space, timing of construction and effect on existing core office buildings. While proposing several new office towers (each appearing larger than the Carew Tower) along Third Street is graphically exciting, such portrayal without projected demand appears disingenuous or alternatively threatening to the health of the existing office base.

8. Context within the County and Region. Investment in the urban core should also be supported with regional policies. We cannot revitalize the inner city without changing the patterns of growth at the periphery of the metropolitan region. As long as cheap, clean suburban land is made accessible through unrestrained localized policies, federal highway dollars and state policies favoring greenfield development, the inner city will continue to suffer from disinvestment. The core county will not get the development investment or tax dollars needed partly because the region is allowed to sprawl. A complementary strategy is needed. Regional and county-wide plans that limit sprawl and channel development back to the central city and urban county and in the future around suburban transit stations will accomplish more than massive public investment in declining neighborhoods. We cannot revitalize inner cities in a sustainable manner without changing the patterns of growth at the periphery of metropolitan regions; it is a simple matter of the finite distribution of resources.

9. Architectural Diversity and Plan Implementation. Any approach is only as good as its implementation. The City of Cincinnati can probably retain the desired quality of development in The Banks as long as the economy thrives. Achieving the design standards of the plan will be a greater challenge in slower economic times. The current concern, however, is related to the rapid pace of development – the creation of an instant city. The potential for success is improved if change is introduced incrementally and monitored carefully to provide opportunity to learn from each step.

Rather than the architectural diversity of incremental growth, The Banks may have large blocks of development with formula configurations dictated by the past successes of developers and by conservative financing criteria. This “instant” neighborhood requires innovative design if it is to avoid the “theme” quality of isolated developments. The architecture must be capable of being rooted in Cincinnati tradition without nostalgically imitating the scale and diversity of old neighborhoods. The architecture must be more than just an old-time style. Nostalgia simply seeks the security of past forms without the inherent principles. The architecture of The Banks is proposed to be traditional. The tradition, however, must be rooted in time and place – in Cincinnati. The difference is in the quality and skill of adaptation by individual developers– a real challenge for

any review board. While the illustrative drawings of The Banks appear promising, unusual leadership will be required to actually achieve and sustain quality design from those selected to develop and finance the various blocks of The Banks.

As stated above, we recommend acceptance of each of the Riverfront Advisors ten recommendations. However, the City and County should invest in additional consideration and refinement of the plan for The Banks in at least nine areas of concern prior to acceptance of the Plan in its entirety.

We appreciate your consideration of our findings and recommendations and your continuous efforts in planning for the long-term benefit of the City, the County and the region.

Very truly yours,

THE HAMILTON COUNTY REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION:

C.W. "Bill" Bercaw, Chair

Hal L. Franke

Robert "Jay" Buchert, Vice-Chair

David Gosling

Robert F. Alsfelder, Jr

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Ronald P. Miller,
Secretary/Executive Director

The Report of the Riverfront Advisors Commission (excerpt from page 4)
September 30 1999

Summary of Recommendations

1. The Banks should create a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week, diverse, pedestrian-friendly urban neighborhood with a mix of uses, including residential housing, specialty retail stores, restaurants and entertainment, office and boutique hotel space.

2. The Banks should fully integrate Central Riverfront and Third Street development to maximize economic potential, strengthen linkages with the Central Business District and build the critical mass to create a riverfront destination.

3. The Banks development should be enhanced and better-connected to the Central Business District by adding three infrastructure and amenity improvements:

- ◆ Pedestrian plazas covering most of Fort Washington Way
- ◆ A major new anchor attraction – The Boardwalk at the Banks – on the west side of the development
- ◆ Exciting, usable green spaces and amenities, particularly in the center of the development.

4. The design of The Banks neighborhood should foster a diverse, welcoming, pedestrian-friendly urban character and create a striking visual impression – a picture postcard for our community. Architectural guidelines including building heights, materials, setbacks, signage, use and design should be adopted and codified.

5. The County-funded above-ground parking garages currently planned for the Central Riverfront Area should be shifted to sites north of Third Street to stimulate Third Street development and increase overall economic return. This creates the opportunity to nearly quadruple private investment stimulated by riverfront public investment and nearly quintuple the total annual new revenue from the development. To meet the County's total parking commitments, this plan also requires that the Crossett site west of the Paul Brown Stadium be used for parking.

6. The City, County and private sector should collaborate to fund the public infrastructure and amenities required to attract and support private development including:

- ◆ Developer land lease payments
- ◆ Tax Increment Financing (TIF) from the City
- ◆ Allocation of a small portion of unobligated County sales tax revenues
- ◆ Subordinate bonds purchased by private lending institutions.

7. The City, County and private sector (through DCI) should jointly create an interim parking and shuttle program to address the near-term shortfall in downtown parking spaces created by moving above-ground parking north of Third Street.

8. The Banks development should stimulate economic inclusion among all ages, races and genders in all aspects, including design, construction, execution and operation. The Banks Entrepreneurial Equity Fund should be established to advance this goal.

9. The Central Riverfront Area should be developed in phases to reflect market demand and stadium, Freedom Center and Riverfront Park development timetables, with Phase I completed in 2003 and Phase II completed in 2006.

10. The City and County should jointly create a Riverfront Development Commission (RDC) to oversee development and ensure implementation of The Banks' vision.