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**Subject:** Further comments on Civic Center Rezoning

To the Commissioners:

I hope this is an appropriate format for my response. I was unable to determine how to add further comments on the August 18 meeting through the website. New information was shared at that meeting, which has added to my concerns about the lack of a comprehensive master plan that integrates the project objectives of the I-10 river crossing, the Civic Center renovation, and the development of the Civic Center parking lot (including the Corps of Engineers office building). In particular, Elizabeth Stevens' expert analysis was a convincing argument for sequencing the action before the Commission with the development of a comprehensive Master Plan.

#### *Parking for New Residences on Lawrence Street*

In the August 18 meeting, it was finally revealed that the concept for the parking garage is for 800-1200 spaces, with a probable capacity of only 1,000. This is a reduction of 250 from the current surface capacity of 1250. During the City Council Committee meeting Tuesday, William Carroll questioned parking closely, and the discussion had to be cut short. I had offered comments to the Planning Commission that the parking requirement for CC.5 needed to be 2 parking spaces per housing unit ON PROPERTY -- the ordinance as written requires only one, which could be fulfilled by street parking in front of the residence.

#### *Parking for Office Workers*

I am now even more concerned about parking associated with the office building. The parking structure will be owned by the City with a monthly fee for office workers. Unless parking in the structure is free to the office staff, the office staff will bypass the parking deck fees and park for free on the adjacent streets. Apparently this is already happening in DeTonti district. I was Executive Vice President of Hargrove Engineers + Constructors when we moved downtown on Royal Street across the street from a City-owned parking deck with plenty of capacity and only a \$40/month fee. I was surprised to see our employees walk 4-5 blocks in the rain to park in the free spots underneath the interstate near Fort Conde Village, even though we gave every employee a \$45/month raise and notified them that they could use that money tax-free for parking. A large parking deck can take a long time to empty, and apparently office staff would much rather walk 5 minutes to their car to be able to depart right away. A 2-hour limit on parking in Church Street East during the workweek should be considered, with exceptions granted only for contractor vehicles and registered residents.

#### *Parking for Events*

In the August 16 Council Committee meeting, Councilman Carroll raised the issue of parking capacity during an event at the Civic Center. Now, during Mardi Gras balls and the few events at the Civic Center, patrons will park for free in the neighborhood and walk rather than pay \$10

to park in the surface lot. When my family first moved into the neighborhood, there was a sign prohibiting parking before, during and after an event at the Civic Center on the power pole in front of my house. I don't know when or why this was removed. It hasn't been too much of a factor, because the Civic Center is nearly dead. But, as we all hope in the future, events will be more frequent and better attended. We need to consider going back to the system in place before, prohibiting street parking in Church Street East around the time of events, and funding police enforcement. This way, the parking deck will get the business it should get during events and events will not become a safety and access problem within CSE.

Populous, the City's consultant, informed stakeholders that 'market forces' will respond to the need for parking for events, so that the City need not provide sufficient event parking itself. I understand this concept, and have experienced it myself when attending major league baseball games. If the venue is in a dense urban area with offices and retail, these parking decks can easily be utilized for events during off hours. The problem with this approach is that surface street parking in CSE is much closer than any other parking decks/lots, which are all north of Church Street. So without a restriction to parking in the neighborhood during events (and effective enforcement), patrons will naturally load up CSE with their cars. A restriction will be necessary no matter how many parking decks are erected, because 1) the deck will require a fee, and 2) decks or parking lots take more time to empty than pulling out of parallel parking spots on a street.

#### *Other Parking Options?*

I am concerned 1) as a taxpayer that the parking garage will not be able to be paid unless revenue from the office building is assured and event parking is incentivized by restrictions to neighborhood street parking, and 2) as a neighbor who will suffer the safety risk and disruption of the enjoyment of my property. The resolution of the parking situation is only one issue that must be studied in a Master Plan so that a rational solution can be found. It appears that there will be a lot of space opened up underneath the interstate. While I appreciated that this might be utilized for recreational areas (ping pong tables) as presented by Populous, perhaps some portions could be used to flex parking capacity. Such options need further study by experts in a Master Plan.

#### *The Need for a workable Master Plan before Planning Commission Decision*

As a citizen and as a neighbor, I am happy that this long-standing project is being worked on with a sense of urgency. At the same time, the bridge and tunnel project is also underway and will impact this Civic Center project. All of this newly built environment deserves a comprehensive Master Plan. An old adage in project management is, "**Those who fail to plan, plan to fail.**" It is the responsibility of our civic leaders to bring this overall Master Plan together, with appropriate time for public consultation.

Col. Delapp stated that he disagreed that the Master Plan needed to be completed before revisions to the DDD zoning ordinance were decided, pointing out that several activities are proceeding in parallel. He is correct, insofar as the Planning Commission staff has done a great deal of work already -- work on zoning has started. But, as every project scheduler knows, there is finish-to-finish logic at work here. The zoning revision activity CANNOT finish until the Master Plan is finished. In my experience of managing several billion dollars' worth of capital projects, trying to work around critical schedule logic almost always results in further delays. The Commission should follow the ordinance as Ms. Stevens outlined, and do the staff

work alongside those formulating the Master Plan. In that way, the Commission's decision will be made in context, based on sound planning principles.

Our neighborhood, particularly the eastern half, will be disrupted as a construction zone for the next 3 years. We will pay a price during demolition and construction. We will willingly pay it, I believe, if we know that the project solution fairly balances the needs and rights of our neighborhood, our fellow citizens, and our out-of-town visitors. We need to make sure that at the end of it all, it will be worth it.

Thank you for considering my comments.

Sincerely,

James (Jim) Backes