



FIRST WARD NEWS

AN OCCASIONAL UPDATE

MAY, 2010
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ABOUT THAT BUDGET

It's been a busy month since Council members and the public received their first look at the City Administrator's proposed budget. There were no surprises, but still a lot of information to consider.

First Ward residents responded in high numbers to my second annual budget survey, and I wasn't surprised to learn that you have your priorities. I passed those along to the rest of City Council, along with the results from their wards (this survey ended up with responses from all over the city). I learned that you want to feel safe in your neighborhoods and downtown; you want police

and fire staffing to be as high as possible. You want the streets to be maintained. You're willing to be flexible about parks maintenance.

You're willing to put up with some inconveniences, though, and I'm grateful for your sense of community. If the City must reduce some services, there are those in the First Ward who said they would rather eliminate holiday tree pickup and allow for the Council to consider privatizing garbage collection but you still expect your streets to be plowed when the snow falls.

Several of you also came to the public forum on the budget on April 15th. You made certain I heard again your commitment to prioritizing core services. At the same time, those present also expressed real concern for human services.

That clear sense of priorities really helps me. The vote on the budget is May 17th.

Budget amendments - DDA and \$2 million

The DDA voted on *Wednesday, May 5* — after vigorous argument — to provide \$2 million for the City's General Fund budget this year in anticipation of a new contract for parking management. The \$2 million is offered prior to any negotiated agreement.

At the Council meeting on *Monday, May 3*, Council member Margie Teall (4th Ward) announced that she, Mayor Hieftje, Council member Higgins (4th Ward) and others had been working to write amendments using this money to: 1) maintain as many safety service jobs as possible for the next year (Teall and Hieftje); 2) eliminate football parking from Allmendinger Park (no mention was made of football parking proposed for Frisinger Park; both are in the 4th Ward); and 3) preserve as much as \$260,000 in funding for human services (Teall and Hieftje and anyone else who chooses to co-sponsor).

The discussions that led to the agreement between the City and the DDA — and the \$2 million for the general fund — took place out of the public eye. I cannot tell you more than that.

History of DDA and parking

Eighteen years ago the City decided that it wasn't handling parking effectively. The changes started with parking structures. I remember when former Third Ward Council member Liz Brater took the Ann Arbor News reporters and others on a bus tour of parking structures to show how they were falling down — concrete was falling on cars, rerod was exposed, and there were holes in the floors. The City wasn't maintaining the structures. **That was the year she won the Mayoral election (1991) — the first Democrat since Al Wheeler (1975).**

The DDA took over management of the structures, and they became maintained, safer, and routinely updated. Then, the City found it was easier to let the DDA manage the parking meters and parking lots. The DDA does all of this through a contract with the City, and for the [past 5 years has been working under a 10 year - \\$10 million contract](#), and letting the City take the money early. The City has taken all \$10 million now, with 5 years still to run on the contract.

The DDA has proposed a new parking management program. The City Council has not yet discussed or agreed to discuss it.

MAKING A DEAL FOR ARGO

At the Council meeting on Monday, May 3, the City Council agreed to a management plan for Argo's headrace embankment that will allow the canoes to re-enter the portage there. Over the next few months, the City will decide whether to repair the toe drains, reconstruct the embankment, or both.

This negotiated settlement will allow the canoes and kayaks to use the headrace this summer while the City decides on a plan and works with the State. The plan must be decided by October 1, 2010 and implemented and completed by November 15, 2011.

There must be opportunities for public input in order for this plan to be acceptable to Council. But the plan must also be something that can be accomplished within that time frame — and focused on the headrace embankment.

Volunteer organizations continue to help the City in efforts to remove the brush, trees and deadfall from the embankment. It's really amazing to be able to see the river from the path along the embankment. I spent part of a rainy afternoon hauling saplings, honeysuckle vines and tree limbs to the path side for the mulcher to come through later. I was working with the high school rowing crews, but there have been other groups working. I'm grateful to everyone who has helped in clearing up the embankment and picking up the trash around Argo. You really make a difference.

CHANGING THE DEFINITION OF PUBLIC LAND

Putting the immediate issue of the Fuller Road Station aside, there are a couple of significant changes proposed for public land.

The ongoing effort to designate all land being used as park land as 'public land' stems from the 2008 ballot initiative that made the sale of 'public land without prior voter approval' illegal. Council member Anglin and others raised the point in 2008 that a lot of land currently considered park was actually zoned residential or something else and was not in the PROS plan (Parks, Recreation and Open Space). Since then, the City has been rezoning this land 'public land'. Rezoning this land 'public land' makes it clear that it won't be used for housing or office or whatever its former zoning might have been — but 'public land' zoning is also used for such land as municipal parking structures and lots, municipal buildings, the libraries, the AATA Blake Bus Station, and other pieces scattered around town (and, for that matter, all the University-owned land). There is no clear-cut division between park-land-as-public-land in the zoning language and all other public land.

Adding the term *Transportation Facilities* to replace the term *Airport* broadens the options for uses of public land. The people in the community who oppose expansion of the Municipal Airport (or having an airport at all) may or may not want to have *transportation facilities* as a replacement term. The benefit to the City to have the flexibility of a municipal train station (anywhere) or train/bus station (anywhere) to go along with parking structures (anywhere) and — somewhere in the future — any other sorts of transportation hubs can be argued in the positive as well as the negative.

The Fuller Road Station

Like others in the community, I am excited by the opportunity to have real rail transportation through Southeast Michigan. I believe that the Midwest has been losing transportation options between cities for the last sixty years, and that our tax dollars would be well-spent on rail and other mass transit. I've read the arguments that state we lack sufficient population; I understand them. But I also don't see how we can move through peak oil (the time when oil production peaks and then drops, as oil becomes too expensive to extract) without this investment in transit.

In the 19th century, railroads built their own train stations. We only need to look at what is now the Gandy Dancer to see how important they saw these gateways. The Amtrak station pales in comparison, isn't big enough to handle increased traffic, and is on a street that also could not handle the buses and taxis needed just for the train. There's insufficient and very inconvenient parking. A train leaves Ann Arbor going east 3 times and west 2 times a day, and Ann Arbor is the busiest stop on the route. Add a commuter train (the proposal) stopping 4 times a day each way, and the infrastructure will be overloaded. A new train station location is really necessary.

Where that train station should be has become an issue — almost as big an issue as whether it will ever have a train stop at it. Funding for rail transportation between Detroit and Chicago, or between Detroit and Jackson, has not come through. The City has studied the options for locating the train station, and believes a strip of park land, currently leased to the University of Michigan as a parking lot, is the best possible place.

The City can build a parking structure jointly with the University in anticipation of later need. The University would pay for 78% of the cost of the structure. The City, in one way or another, would pay for the bus transit (ground floor) and bike

station (with lockers and showers). The parking structure would be available to the public who use Fuller Park on nights and weekends, just as the parking lot is currently. The University would stop renting the parking lots on the other side of Fuller Road. These lots might be returned to play area. The parking structure would hold about 900 cars; like most parking structures, if demand grew, more floors could be added.

The questions about this site and this use

Several questions have been raised, and I'll only try to summarize them. I'd like to hear from you regarding your thoughts:

Is it appropriate for the City to use park land — even park land that's been used as a parking lot for 15 years — for a parking structure and (maybe) train station? If the park has permanent buildings on it, it won't return to being a park any time soon.

The University currently rents parking lots in Fuller Park; that money goes to the parks. This proposed arrangement would increase the number of parking spaces available but decrease the dollars the University pays in rent. The University would be paying most of the cost of building the parking structure. Should the University pay more rent, at least equal to its current agreement with the City?

Is the City serious about a train station and train transport if it is only building a parking structure? Is this a give-away to the University?

If this agreement is finalized with the University, what guarantees are there that the University won't build more parking structures nearby, like on Wall Street, where they had been previously proposed?

How important is it that this issue is put before the voters? The City Charter doesn't require it. Some members of the community feel that, although this proposes a long-term lease, it's effectively a sale and should require a vote.

Please let me know what you think.