



To: Dix Park Master Plan Executive Committee
City Council

From: Raleigh Historic Development Commission
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RE: Dorothea Dix Park Master Plan

The Raleigh Historic Development Commission (RHDC) has reviewed **preliminary** plans for the Dorothea Dix Park Master Plan. While RHDC understands the master planning process is still underway, the Commission **appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback** based upon plans that have recently been made available to the public.

SIGNIFICANCE & COMPLEXITY

Acknowledging the inherent complexity of planning for the park's future, the RHDC also recognizes the City's **immense responsibility as stewards of a legacy site** of deep historic and cultural significance both to the City of Raleigh, as well as the State of North Carolina. These layers include not only the historic built environment and cultural landscapes associated with the hospital itself, but extend to the site's Native American, antebellum, and Civil War history. **This project, for which authenticity is key, will indeed define Raleigh for generations to follow.**

RETENTION & ADAPTATION

The **retention and adaptive** use of the historic campus to the greatest extent possible provides a meaningful opportunity to both commemorate and elevate the spirit of Dorothea Dix. These tangible expressions of Dix's noble efforts provide an unparalleled opportunity to meet a myriad of community needs that otherwise might not be readily available, all while preserving the physical history of the site and its stories. **The RHDC supports the proposed retention of approximately half of the campus' built environment** to serve a variety of new uses while reserving some for future uses.

EXPANDING NATIONAL REGISTRY

While many of these buildings are already contributing historic resources within the Dix Hill National Historic District (1990), others are likely eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as nearly three decades have transpired since the campus core was designated. **An expanded inventory of National Register buildings** would potentially allow the use of Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credits to offset the cost of modernizing these historic buildings for 21st-century use. Furthermore, this approach may well enhance the ability to obtain grants and other private financing necessary to support the operation of Dix Park for years to come.

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CAUTIONARY APPROACH

In general, the RHDC **advises a cautionary and holistic approach towards demolition, particularly as it relates to the eastern portion** of the campus where the greatest concentration of buildings is located. While some high-level cost-benefit assessments have been conducted, a detailed examination of embedded costs does not appear to have occurred. This includes costs to demolish buildings and remove from the site, costs to mothball until a future point in time, cost for new construction, etc. Because the execution of Dix Park will happen over the course of many years, the **RHDC recommends mothballing, or preferably, a temporary use wherever possible until future plans for the park are more fully realized.** To make hasty decisions to raze buildings may foreclose use and funding opportunities prematurely.

RETENTION & ADAPTIVE USE OF STAFF HOUSING VILLAGE

The RHDC places a **high value on the retention and adaptive use of the staff housing village.** Because of their modest size and general condition, these units provide an easy opportunity for bite-sized public-private partnerships, thereby increasing the pool of available private funds for the park. Whether they are used to serve community needs as art studios, maker or educational spaces, potential housing, etc., they require minimal rehabilitation effort and cost. Coupled with a transformative project related to arts and cultural resources, the retention of these mid-century buildings and tree canopy could also serve as an opportunity to preserve the small, suburban, Post-War housing of our recent past (and thusly not yet fully appreciated) that are otherwise disappearing at an accelerated rate across the city.

AN EXAMPLE FROM THE HOUSTON EXPERIENCE

To reference a similarly-scaled and sited project, the RHDC recommends a careful study of **Project Row Houses** in Houston, TX. This collective of small c. 1930 shotgun houses in the city's Third Ward community marries the preservation of Houston's built environment with facilitating specific, aspirational community needs. What began as 22 houses across two blocks has grown to 39 houses over five blocks. With seed **money from the National Endowment for the Arts** and support from hundreds of volunteers who prepped buildings for new use, houses are now used for a combination of art exhibitions and housing for resident artists, small-scale spaces for youth education with a focus on the arts, and housing for single mothers who live on-site for a period of one year while finishing their education.

The **retention and adaptive use of the Dix staff housing village** would not in any way detract from the overarching vision and enjoyment of the park, but rather serve as an innovative, small-scaled mechanism through which to meet pressing community needs while also satisfying municipal preservation goals as stewards to historic resources.

WRIGHT & LINEBERGER BUILDINGS

From a built perspective, the **RHDC also recommends the retention of the Wright Building (1938)** for its integrity, quality design, and relationship with surrounding adjacent buildings, specifically the Lineberger Building (1950). The city has a robust demand for teaching spaces, either as a dedicated school or multi-generational classes. The architectural style/configuration of the Wright Building easily lends itself to this use, and its retention would serve to hold this edge of the campus in a more cohesive fashion.

NOTEWORTHY ARCHITECTURE

There is a concentration of mid-century architecture on the campus that is noteworthy, much of which is directly adjacent to the McBryde Building (1856). Understanding the intention to

take McBryde back to an earlier architectural state necessitates the removal of these buildings as part of proposed changes to “The Ridge,” the **RHDC recommends the retention and adaptive use of Haywood Gymnasium** as a fine remaining example of mid-century architecture from the NC Piedmont executed on a smaller scale than its period campus counterparts.

THE PARK AS A PARK

Turning to the site itself, the premise for the proposed park has been suggested as a “19th-century pastoral landscape” to the west, and a “21st-century activated park” to the east, separated by the railroad track. As such, the **RHDC finds the proposed “event hub” as incongruous to this plan. Particularly within the context of a “pastoral landscape,”** it significantly compromises the ability to enjoy green space as a true place of respite, restoration, and reflection.

While state hospital buildings across the country were designed largely to the architectural theories of Thomas Story Kirkbride, known as the “guiding model of hospital building,” the careful, intentional design of a hospital’s therapeutic landscapes were considered every bit as integral towards the treatment of mental illness as the physical housing and treatment itself. In addition, while the hub intrudes dramatically into the landscape, **the required infrastructure of vehicular roads necessary to support the hub detracts from the integrity of this therapeutic landscape and is also a concern.**

VEHICLES & PARKING

While easy access to aspects of the “campus” or “park” is desirable, there are **risks in making Dix a vehicular pass-through without great caution in planning.** As the proposed plan currently exists, the park appears to be largely driven to support auto-oriented needs, detracting from the site’s long enjoyed bucolic landscapes. Understanding significant costs associated with alternative means of parking visitors, **all options, including opportunities for underground parking and concentrating parking to the perimeter, should be explored.** It is unusual to see a public park of this caliber be so compromised by vehicular access beyond its perimeter and is antithetical to its enjoyment as a world-class park.

SACRED SPACES & PLACES

Second to the cemetery, **The Grove** is recognized as being the most sacred of the site’s cultural landscapes. **The RHDC is concerned that its integrity and simple beauty is compromised and diminished** by an oversaturation of proposed pathways/roadways that crisscross this critical area and its viewsheds.

CULTURAL LANDSCAPE REPORT

Speaking to the park’s cultural landscapes, **there is a strong need for a detailed cultural landscape report,** both to properly honor the long history of the site, and to provide a basis as to why elements are proposed where they are. At present, there appears to be little homage to the site’s historic landscapes, either intentionally designed to facilitate therapeutic treatment from an aesthetic standpoint (i.e., The Grove) or those that served a more utilitarian purpose, such as extensive agricultural uses. In addition, **it is imperative that archaeology be addressed** in the master plan recommendations and phasing.

As plans for Dorothea Dix Park continues to coalesce, the RHDC looks forward to seeing a final proposal that both addresses this feedback and remedies these concerns.