

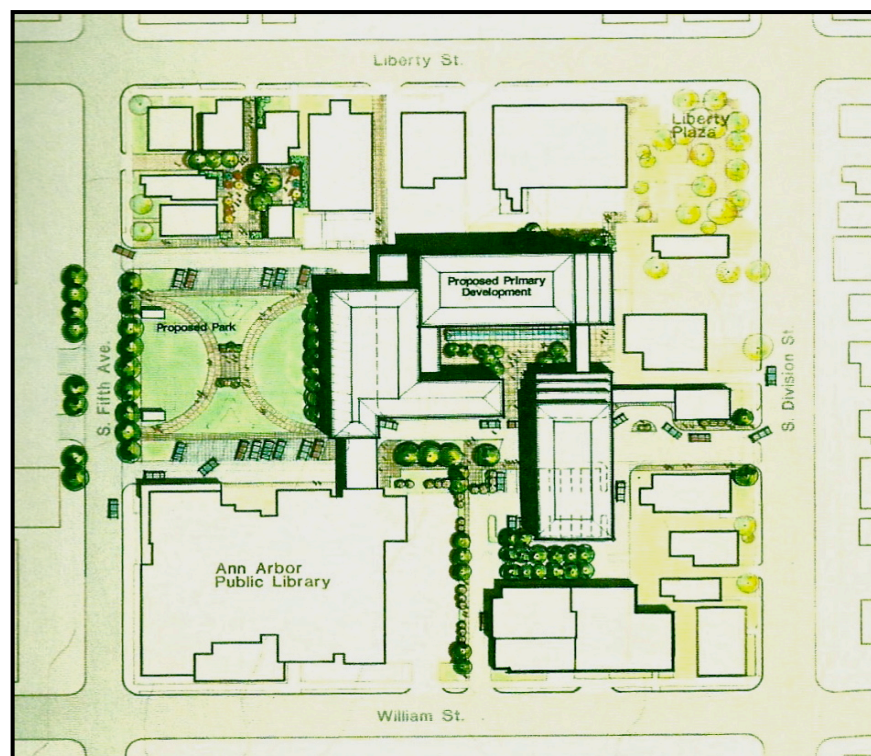
The Long Struggle for a Downtown Central Park:

It is time for you, the public, to speak once more!

Discussions about developing the Library Lot—the last publicly owned, centrally located vacant surface in Ann Arbor—have gone back and forth for twenty-five years. On one side are the public—the people—who, when asked, overwhelmingly favor creating a central community park, a town square.

On the other are the Downtown Development Authority (DDA), the Mayor, and some members of City Council. They favor a tall, massive structure containing a hotel.

In 1991 both sides could have celebrated when a study by Carl Luckenbach produced a design for the Library Block that included a park along Fifth Avenue and substantial new construction in the center of the block. The Luckenbach/Ziegelman study was commissioned by the City.



Since 1991, *three official public opinion surveys* have confirmed the public's desire for a park on this public land. They are the Calthorpe Report in 2006, the DDA survey used in the Connecting William Street Study in 2012, and the Park Advisory Commission Report in 2013. After each survey, the DDA and some members of Council have ignored the expressed public will.

In 2006 the vision of a park on the site was emphatically reinforced in the Calthorpe Report, the product of a lengthy public process involving hundreds of citizens in three Public Design Workshops. The workshops were conducted by the highly respected urban planning group, Calthorpe Associates, again commissioned by Council. Based on the public workshops and analysis of zoning and market conditions, the Calthorpe Report presented a comprehensive Downtown Development Strategy and included this recommendation: “Pursue and design a Town Square or central civic area that incorporates an outdoor meeting place, an art center, underground parking, an indoor facility, and mixed-use buildings.” It reads like a description of the Luckenbach plan. A resounding endorsement!

Up to this point, the people of Ann Arbor and their appointed leaders seemed to share the same vision. But then something changed.

The DDA received the Calthorpe Report and went to work building the underground parking. But what happened to the Town Square? Instead of public open space, the DDA and City Administrator envisioned a huge hotel and Conference Center. They and Council issued a Request for Proposals but ignored two proposals for a park and quickly narrowed the rest down to two: both featuring hotel-conference centers. The winner was all but signed when opponents—diligent citizens—finally got Council to recognize that the contract required the City to assume heavy financial risks.

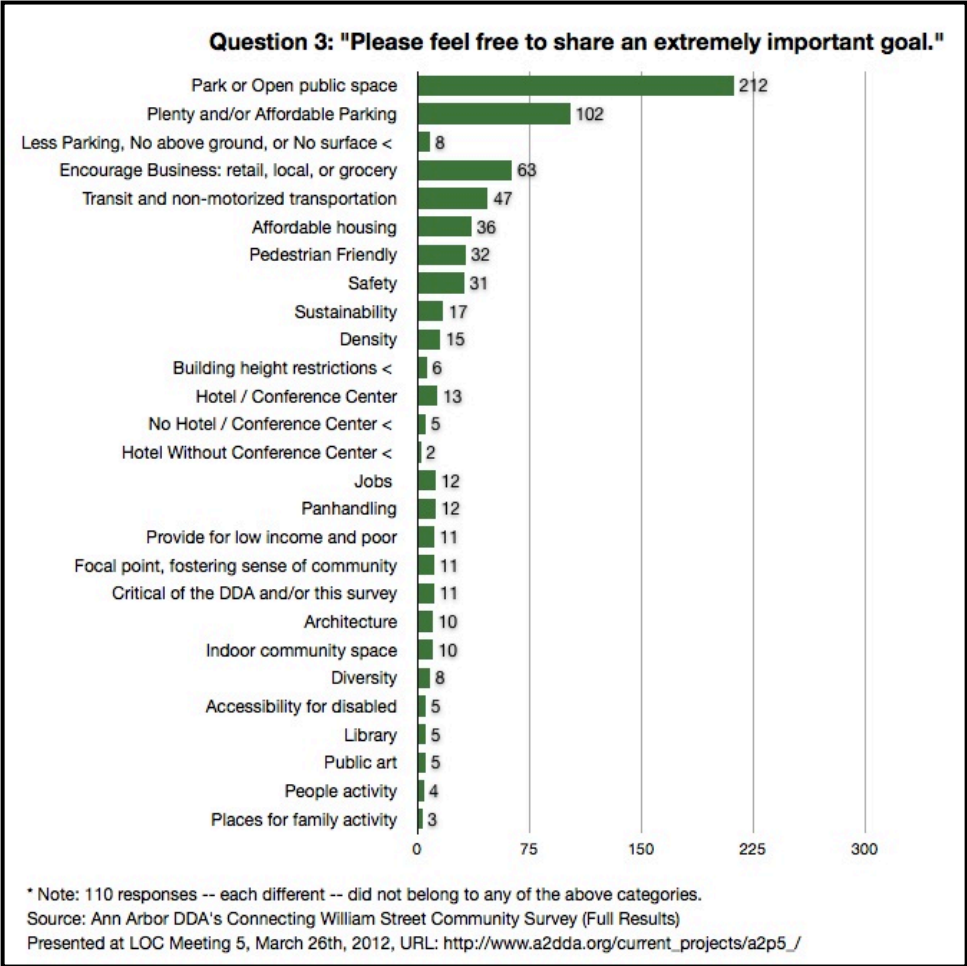
Concerned citizens—who remembered the vision of a park on that site—had been studying the issue and reading the contract. They had spoken at meetings and talked with Council members. They pointed out that if the proposed Valiant Hotel-Conference Center were to fail, as many do, the City would have to use tax-payer funds to pay off the bonds required for its construction. And so, at the last minute, Council voted against the Valiant proposal. Citizen effort had won; the downtown park could now be realized.

The Density Team on Council was not ready to accept the outcome. Instead, they added time to the game clock. Council directed the DDA to conduct “a robust public process” to make recommendations for the future of five publicly owned properties, including the Library Lot. Many people interpreted “robust public process” to mean that this time the community would be invited to participate in formulating a plan for the Library Lot. However, the DDA entered into this project—which it named “Connecting William Street” –with a preconceived desired outcome: dense development including a downtown hotel. (Maximum density is understandably the goal of a DDA, whose power and money is derived from the tax increase when a downtown site is developed. The denser the development, the larger the tax increment collected and dispensed by the DDA.)

So the DDA designed a frankly biased multiple-choice survey as the primary means for public input. “Frankly biased” because *nowhere in the survey was the public offered the choice of a park or open space*. When they received an overwhelming pro-park response *despite* the survey’s designed bias, they dismissed it. They then held a series of focus-group meetings during which three development “scenarios” were presented and participants were allowed to choose only between “dense, denser, and

densest” construction on each of the public lands. For the Library Lot, the graphics strongly favored “densest.”

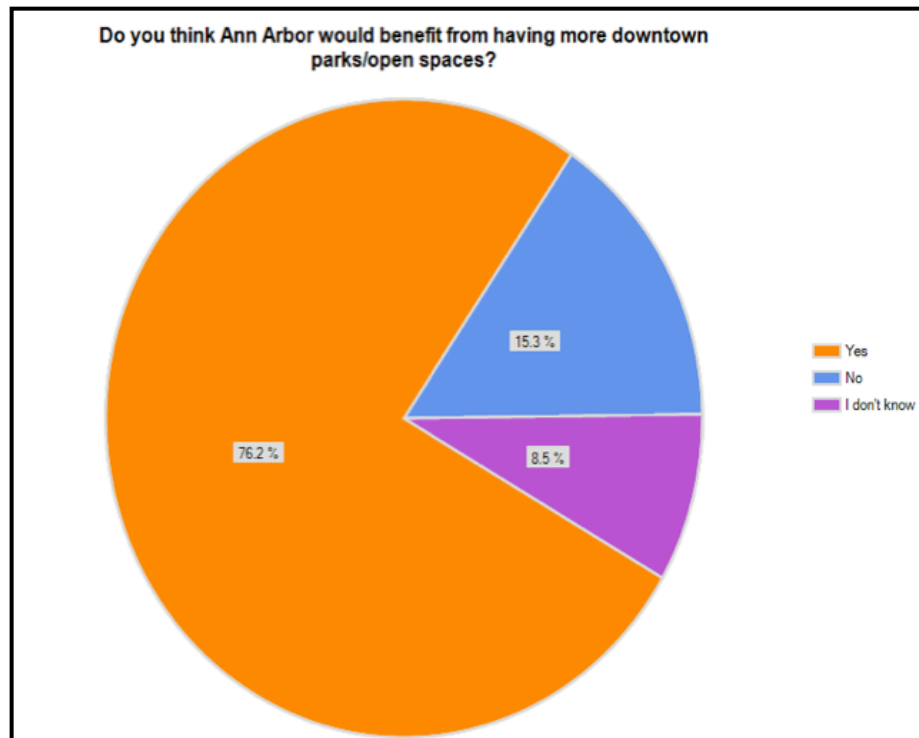
Nowhere in the survey or the focus meetings was the public offered the choice of a park or open space. However, there was one open-ended question: “Please feel free to share an extremely important goal.” Many people seized this opportunity to ask for a park. Collating the hundreds of responses was a daunting task, because people had used a variety of words instead of checking a box. The DDA did not attempt this tedious task. But others did, and the result showed that a park far outstripped any other goals that were offered—confirming, in 2012, the results of the Calthorpe Report of 2006.



Citizens had won again! Despite the DDA’s best efforts to make the public choose dense development, the public chose a park. *And yet, following the Connecting William Street study, the DDA’s report to Council recommended dense development of the site. The CWS report barely acknowledged that many people had shown interest in a park – grudgingly allowing that a park/plaza might be created on the Library Lot – at the discretion of City Council or a future developer. Fully aware of the controversy, in*

January 2013 City Council did NOT approve the Connecting William Street report. Instead it was set aside, not accepted as an official policy.

The Density Team on Council, having failed to gain approval for Connecting William Street, again added time to the clock and moved the goal posts once more. Council referred the question to the Parks Advisory Commission (PAC) and asked whether any additional parks were needed in the downtown, and if so, where. The PAC created a subcommittee to find the answer. The Density Team may have been alarmed when the members of the PAC subcommittee took their assignment seriously. PAC committee members read books and attended seminars about urban parks, and they invited presentations by a variety of interested local groups. Well aware of the criticism directed at the biased survey of the DDA, they designed a new online survey to learn what people really wanted. Where the DDA survey had focused on Development and excluded open space from the options, the new PAC survey was all about parks: current users, potential users, functions possible in parks (athletic, children’s play, outdoor performances, quiet sitting, civic celebrations), costs, trade-offs, problems such as panhandling or safety. The subcommittee was pleasantly surprised by the 1,608 people who went online to participate in the survey. A whopping 76% of them favored more downtown parks and open space.



After compiling their responses, the Subcommittee reported that “the most commonly expressed community-based priorities include: a central location; sufficient size for passive recreation/community gatherings; shade, and natural features.” The Subcommittee recommended a park on the Library Lot that would be larger than the 5,000 square feet allocated in the Connecting William Street study. A member of the City Council density faction intervened at the last minute to insert pro-development language into the PAC report, but he couldn’t change its overall recommendation of a larger public open space on the Library Lot. PAC delivered their report and recommendations to Council in October of 2013 and, unlike the DDA’s report, City Council voted to approve the PAC report on downtown parks and open space.

While the PAC downtown parks study was just getting underway in early 2013, the story took a dark turn. *The pro-density advocates had invested a lot of time and energy in the Connecting William Street Study, and they were loath to abandon it. One of them held appointive offices on both the DDA’s Connecting William Street committee and on the Planning Commission, of which he was then the chair. He wasn’t going to let City Council stand in the way of making Connecting William Street report an official document. With no public notice, he placed the Connecting William Street report on the agenda and persuaded the Planning Commission to designate it as a Planning Commission “resource.” This meant that this biased, pro-density study, which had pointedly NOT been approved by City Council, could be used as an official reference by future planners. It was a stealthy move that avoided a public hearing, and it would have serious consequences later.*

In April of 2014, Council voted to dedicate 12,000 square feet of the Library Lot for a park—the entire Fifth Avenue frontage of the Library Lot site—while offering the remaining eastern portion of the Lot for development, stipulating that the developer must agree to support and maintain the park.

The people had been heard; Council had approved a park on the Library Lot! Surely this time the winning touchdown would stand? It seemed so. City Council delegated to the City Administrator the task of finding a consultant to solicit and evaluate development proposals that would work together with the designated park. In 2014, a consulting firm, CBRE, was hired to issue an Offering Memorandum (OM) inviting developers to offer plans for the Library Lot. The offering memorandum alerted prospective developers that 12,000 square feet had been designated for a public open space.

*However, attached to the OM, among other things, was the Connecting William Street report, and the developers were warned to read it and conform to it. This is the report that City Council had pointedly **not** approved.*

And now, in September of 2015, it is as though someone has erased all of the public process outcomes in favor of a public park on the Library Lot. The departing City Administrator announces that there are two proposals under consideration for developing the Library Lot. Both are tall, have a large footprint, and include a hotel. Two competing development proposals: two multistory, massive buildings, neither of which allows space for the 12,000 square-foot park/plaza approved after long and thorough public

process. The magnitude of this betrayal is illustrated by the graphics below, comparing the footprints of the proposed new skyscrapers with the outline of the 12,000 square-foot park approved by Council.



The CA Ventures proposal, above, has only about 6,000 of the required 12,000 sq feet as open, public space. None of it "green."



The Core Spaces proposal, above, has only about 4,000 of the required 12,000 sq feet as public space. About 2,500 is “green.”

The people of Ann Arbor must once again persuade the City to honor the public’s desire for a park on the public’s land. Council must reject both of the proposals that would destroy that possibility. There are many downtown sites where a hotel could be built – one is under construction and another is already proposed near the medical campus. But there is only one site where a central park can be created, large enough for civic gatherings and connected by pedestrian routes to Main Street and State Street, to buses and to the Library. And we already own it.

Tell your Council Members to reject both of the proposed massive developments. Attend one of the Thursday, October 22 public meetings at the downtown library at 3–5pm or 6:30–8:30 pm. Bring a friend. Speak up at meetings of the Planning Commission, the Parks Advisory Commission, and the DDA. Tell them what every survey has demonstrated:

We, the people, want a park on the Library Lot!

Email the Mayor and all Council Members by clicking here: [Where’s the Park?](#) Include your address so the member representing your Ward can respond.

Attend a Public Input Meeting on 22 October from 3-5 pm or 6:30-8:30 pm at the Downtown Ann Arbor Public Library.

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