

Parking Deck? Or stacked deck!



St. Lawrence Square by Robin Cape

The recent restoration of the 1926 Grove Arcade and the redevelopment of the surrounding area is one of the most ambitious and far-reaching initiatives to reclaim downtown Asheville, NC. Our firm, along with Tessier & Associates, is at the forefront of this effort with the design of St. Lawrence Square, a public/private, mixed-use development.

-- (taken from the website of Shook Kelley, byline "it's all consuming")

Once again, Asheville citizens seem to be the last to know about the plans that the city has for our downtown. You have probably heard something about the parking deck proposed to be built next to the Battery Park Apartments. But you probably don't know that the parking deck plans include a seven-story multi use skyscraper built right across from the Civic Center, plans that are being touted by the designer as a private/public mixed use development.

I support the careful development of our downtown to decrease sprawl, ensure the vibrancy and strength of our local economy and to make the best use of our city's infrastructure. But it is crucial that as we develop we follow some essential guidelines that respect the historic, cultural and artistic qualities of our city. Development policies should include, not blindsides the citizens.

After years of planning and expense, the public is only gradually becoming aware that the City has grand plans to build a five level parking deck that would wrap around two sides of the Battery Park Apartments. The elderly residents would have their windows darkened, their fresh air cut off, and their view blocked . It seems that the city is not concerned about that because that is the way they appear to treat

citizens in general. To judge by how this whole project is proceeding, the citizens of Asheville have had their view of this development blocked, and our eyes have been darkened to the plans proposed.

When a few people found out about this plan and spoke up they were told that the deck had been planned for years and that we had already spent a lot of money on it. It was implied that we should have already known about the "deck". Yet, the only things that I have seen prior to the deep digging by local citizens, have been the small articles published in the newspaper. If you look back at those pictures, the parking deck is shown as essentially a "dot on a line". The line is Haywood Street and the dot is the parking deck. The only thing we can tell from that is that somewhere on Haywood, there is a plan for a parking deck. Nowhere is the overall design for the multi-use private/public partnership development shown, nowhere are we included in the whole plan.

And it should be noted that the money spent so far on this project was for purchase of downtown property -- an investment that would certainly make money for the city if it were sold back to private interests.

When the parking study was done it was the opinion of the consultants that additional parking would be needed downtown given our inadequate transportation infrastructure, our desire for increased downtown residential and commercial units and to serve our Civic Center facility. The consultants announced that people didn't want to walk more than a block to reach their destination and a site near the Civic Center was proposed. The initial target was the existing Southern Bell parking lot, but for unannounced reasons that site was dismissed. Now grand plans for St. Lawrence Square are in the works and on the way. I encourage each of you to go to the website by project designer Shook Kelly.

http://www.shookdesign.com/pages/urban_05.html

It illustrates the plans, that for some reason, the city has neglected to show the rest of us: plans for the rerouting of the streets, a new circle and quite a few new buildings. Why does this parking lot cost so much? The cost for this parking deck is now over \$21 million, that's approximately \$30,000. per parking space. But is all this for just 650 parking spaces or is the whole design a part of the large price tag? The huge price increase from the original proposal of \$8 million to \$21 million was treated by City Council as if it was minor or caused by inflation. In fact, it was caused by the infrastructure needs of the additional proposed buildings, and the cost of re-routing Page Avenue. This subsidy to private commercial development is not openly acknowledged by most council members. Do they themselves know the extent of these plans? Also not acknowledged is that fact that 200 spaces in the new deck are allocated for the private development. That means we won't really get 600

new spaces we've been promised. The new developers are having a parking deck built for them.

Is this the same parking deck we were once told we needed? We are sometimes reminded that we made promises to the merchants in the Grove Arcade. But are we truly fulfilling that promise? The location has changed and there are three other buildings involved. The only similarity is that the words "parking deck" are used in both proposals.

The City has never announced the full facts about the parking deck or any information at all about the three other buildings proposed in the same development. Rather, it seems like considerable effort has been expended to conceal this development. At the Downtown Association "State of Downtown" luncheon on September 28, I was dismayed to see that there were no renderings of the parking deck and the new proposed development available for us all to see. Is the city not proud of this project or are they working under the new model that they must keep projects like this "not on the radar" of the public". (<http://www.mountainx.com/news/2005/0803city.php>)

Though many members of the city assured me this was only an oversight, it is one that continues to confound and disappoint the citizens and lead to ill will for our development future.

So, what of the other three buildings the City proposes? From what I understand they are a two story, a three story and a seven to ten story building, all in the same area between the Civic Center and the Battery Park Apartments. Together, the three buildings and the parking deck will almost completely obscure the view of the Basilica St. Lawrence from every angle, except along Haywood Street near the library. The bottom floor of each building, totaling over 15,000 square feet, will be devoted to retail shops. Is the city intentionally concealing this development, because the increased retail competition is just as likely to *harm* the Grove Arcade merchants as help them?

City Council did not hold a press conference in front of the Civic Center showing off a scale model of the wondrous changes they propose. I suggest that they put these drawings into the public hallway next to the Downtown Development offices and give people an opportunity to truly understand what is proposed here. Are we assumed to be simply luddites in the path of progress, or is the city our partner in the thoughtful and careful planning for our city's future? Can we continue to hoodwink the community and think that we will have support for any of the development the city would wish to support? No wonder citizens are concerned about development. Who is their ally?

There seems to be a disconnect in some of our council decisions. Affordable housing is seen as one of the main issues facing our city, yet with this decision they voted to destroy the quality of life of low income residents in some of the only affordable housing downtown.

Many council members claim pride in our historic buildings, but they have voted to obscure the view of one of our most beautiful churches and support a project that may well damage our glorious Basilica, its magnificent dome already cracked.

Yes, there is a seven to ten story building planned for the space in front of the Civic Center, and it is a shame you had to hear it from me.