

December 8, 2010

To: James Madison Park Property Committee

From: Ledell Zellers
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A number of issues have been and are being discussed in relation to the three homes within James Madison Park. Following are some of those questions and the answers to those questions based on the information I have and on my perspective on the issues.

What approach to the three homes will result in the most money for the city?

If one considers the goal that has been pretty much universally endorsed of the city continuing to own the land under the houses, the most money for the city would be gained by selling the houses where they stand with the city retaining title to the land. To address the concerns of many people, the houses would need to have deed restrictions preventing alterations that would diminish the historic structures. There would likely also need to be clear requirements on repairs and maintenance due to the poor condition of the buildings.

The market value of the houses sold in place far exceeds what the city would gain if it were to sell the houses (or give them away) with the requirement that they be moved.

That said, considering the severe deterioration of the homes under the city's ownership, the purchase price is likely to be significantly lower than it might otherwise be...particularly if a condition of the sale includes a clear and legally binding requirement for rehabilitation of the homes. Considering the historic merit of the homes, this rehabilitation should be a part of the condition of sale.

Wouldn't it be just as good to move the homes to another lot within close proximity of their current location?

First of all moving any home puts it at risk for damage or collapse. It requires leaving behind or destroying some of the historic parts of the building including minimally the basement.

In addition these homes are not wood structures. Wooden homes can be moved more readily and with less risk than brick, stone or other masonry structures. Therefore the risk of significant structural damage or collapse of these buildings should not be underestimated.

In addition these homes have a close historical connection. They were all homes of the Collins family, an important family in Madison's history. The homes have a historical connection to the land where they now reside. Moving them tears apart this historic landscape and severs the connection that the homes in their current location demonstrate.

And clearly there would be many losses if the city demolished the houses...the loss of acknowledged historic buildings the most evident loss.

Would removal of the houses provide a better lake view for passing motorists as some have said?

For starters we presumably want passing motorists to be attending more to driving than the view...but even if they have their eyes glued to the view, the demolition or removal of the two western most houses would provide (assuming going the speed limit) about an additional 4 seconds of view. It is not worth destroying Madison's historical architecture and heritage for 4 seconds of view by motorists.

What about the urban streetscape? I have heard a couple of people say that there is a discontinuity since there is a vacant lot between the two western-most homes and the main Collins house.

Most people see small green spaces and pocket parks as a plus in an urban streetscape. If there were strong sentiment against maintaining this pocket park, there are an unfortunate number of opportunities to fill in this park with a home of the same vintage as those in the surrounding neighborhood. Well over fifteen have been torn down or moved in the past five years which would have looked "at home" in this location.

What is the sentiment of the area neighborhood associations in regard to the properties in JMP?

Capitol Neighborhoods Executive Council supports retaining the homes in place and selling them to private owners. CNI supports the city retaining the land with a long term lease to the home owners. The TLNA's perspective is similar.

What should any dollars generated from the sale of the homes be used for?

The downtown suffers from a deficiency of parks. This park is heavily used and has suffered from a lack of attention and from deferred maintenance. All dollars from the sale of the land or the homes should go to James Madison Park for maintenance and upgrading.

Would this sale be a long term fix for maintaining James Madison Park?

While the money from sale of the houses would provide much needed funding for upgrading and fixing some of the deferred maintenance, it would be a onetime infusion of cash. Regular maintenance of all our parks should be included in our city's operating budget.

In closing I ask that you reject the notion of destroying or moving these historic homes. Richard Moe, President of the National Trust for Historic Preservation was in Madison in 2008. In response to a question about his impression of Madison following a tour of the downtown, he noted that Madison is losing too many of its historic buildings. He said we need to be careful. As members of this committee you are in a position to prevent more of Madison's historic and landmarked buildings from being destroyed. I ask that you vote to retain these historic buildings in their historic setting.