

perspective

Leave it: Civic Center Park is a vital open space, so let it be

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The people of Denver should not give up premier park land in Civic Center Park to house new Colorado Historical Society facilities.

The society needs a new home following the state's decision to demolish its 30-year-old building and replace it and the adjoining judicial building with two new structures. Funding for this relocation is not assured; the amount to be provided by the State Historic Fund is unknown. However, funding from the state legislature is to be requested in January 2008.

The society is currently exploring three options. One is Civic Center Park, where the society would undertake construction on and under the space's open space. The society envisions a four-story museum and office building, a large auditorium, and an underground exhibit hall. Other options are the state-owned parking lot at Lincoln Street and Colfax Avenue and the permit center site at Bannock Street and 14th Avenue, across from the park.

The society's need is pressing, but the park is clearly at risk. Some say it should absorb this development, that state management of the space is acceptable. We believe that this land is a legacy best managed by Denver and that it should not be available for development by the state.

Civic Center Park has always been accorded the special protections and policies applicable to parks. The people of Denver expect and deserve no less; it is their park. For nearly a century, this space has been developed, funded, supervised and maintained under the city's park authority. Its essence is the shared character of all parks - space for play and inspiration, room for civic gatherings. Further, the park is part of Denver's long-established Civic Center Historic District, a status that calls for unswerving stewardship. To relinquish stewardship of this legacy and divert a major segment of the park from its intended use would be bad public policy.

This green and open space is there by choice, not chance. In 1924, an earlier idea to "balance" the Carnegie Library for "artistic purposes" was rejected by citizens and planning experts alike. The giants of design and politics who worked on the park between 1907 and 1924 would not suggest today that any of the open space be sacrificed for the sake of beaux-arts symmetry.

It is also unimaginable that they would today suggest diminishment of any downtown green space.

Others think this development will address the need for improved security and maintenance, and provide welcoming public activity. This expectation is unrealistic.

Further, the size of the proposed building (which is out of scale to the rest of the park) and the complexities of the underground exhibit hall, related mechanical and ventilation systems, loading docks, etc., portend additional intrusions into the park.

Experience tells us that preservation of open spaces within Denver and beyond is essential to the city's quality. Thus, it is incumbent on citizens to act as watchdogs over Denver's parks. In this regard, there has yet to be a full public exploration of whether this development is permissible in a park without a vote of the people. In any event, to sacrifice park land in response to the society's predicament would be a terrible precedent. Would a similar development be appropriate in Sloan's Lake Park? Cheesman Park? Washington Park?

Such a sacrifice would also be contrary to Denver's 2005 Master Plan for Civic Center Park.

At the end of 2006, the Historical Society's New Facilities Task Force and its consultants rejected the Civic Center Park site, made a strong and persuasive case for the permit center site, and endorsed restoration of the Carnegie Library for city and state use.

Certainly the permit center site (and perhaps

other sites under state or private ownership) would provide opportunities for phased development, an above-ground exhibit hall, better access, room for later expansion, and a construction scenario that could be implemented more easily.

Don't be misled. Denver's Civic Center Park is at risk.

It's time to be informed and speak up. Remind the mayor and members of City Council that this park land is too important to relinquish. Civic Center Park belongs to the people.

Carolyn and Don Etter are honorary members of the American Society of Landscape Architects and the recipients of Colorado Preservation's 2006 Dana Crawford Award for Excellence in Preservation.