



May 14, 2014

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Brian J. Hanlon
Director
DC Department of General Services
2000 14th Street NW, 8th Floor
Washington, DC 20009

VIA E-MAIL: brian.hanlon@dc.gov

RE: Comments on Planned Request for Offers for Eastern Branch Building

Dear Director Hanlon:

We are pleased to share the following comments on your department's planned Request for Offers for the Eastern Branch Building, the city-owned former Boys and Girls Club building located at 261 17th Street SE. Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC) 6B voted 9-0-1 to send this letter during our properly noticed May 13, 2014 meeting with a quorum present.

Process

In April, ANC 6B's Hill East Task Force held two additional community meetings to gather input from nearby neighbors and other interested residents to determine what uses the neighborhood would like to see in the building. Twenty residents attended the task force's April 9 meeting at St. Coletta of Greater Washington while 32 residents attended the task force's April 30 meeting at Payne Elementary School.

Each meeting began with a discussion of the building's constraints, including its need for significant repair, unique floor plan, lack of ADA features such as an elevator and ramp, R-4 zoning and lack of city funding. Meeting participants also discussed and identified current community or neighborhood-serving uses that already exist in close proximity to the building.

With existing uses and constraints in mind, participants were then divided up into small groups to consider and prioritize a list of potential uses for the site. At the end of each meeting, the groups reported out their results and the task force summarized areas of general agreement. A draft document outlining feedback from the two meetings was then distributed to meeting attendees and posted on the New Hill East neighborhood listserv on May 2 for additional feedback and comments. The draft document was revised once more, considered by ANC 6B's Planning & Zoning Committee on May 6 and used as the basis for this letter.

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Preferred Uses

ANC 6B believes that the city should pursue responses that include a community or neighborhood-serving use in the building. Many Hill East residents grew up with the Eastern Branch Boys and Girls Club and have fond memories of activities in the building. When it was open, it was a community gathering space and the only recreational facility in the immediate area.

Ideally, strong responses to the RFO will provide flexible space in the building for community and neighborhood events and activities. Such a space could exist in a portion of the building, such as the first floor, and be rented or leased out to multiple groups and used for multiple purposes.

ANC 6B recommends that the RFO clearly state that the community would like to see one or more of the following community or neighborhood uses in a successful response:

- Daycare
- Adult daycare/senior services
- Recreational uses such as dance or fitness classes
- Community meeting/event space

While this list is certainly not meant to exclude other potential community uses, responses that include one or more of these uses should be given greater weight or points by DGS in the evaluation process.

Housing

With no city funding available for the building at this time, we recognize that responses to the RFO will likely include some non-community use or uses that will make the project financially attractive to potential developers and/or organizations. ANC 6B and the community would prefer this non-community use be housing. We envision housing on the top floors of the building with community use(s) on the first floor. The community has expressed interest in housing for families and/or senior housing, though we recognize that the non-community use will have to generate enough revenue to sustain and support any community use(s) in the building.

Our support for housing as the building's non-community use does not mean we would not consider responses with other non-community use ideas. However, we feel that responses that include housing should be given greater weight or points by DGS in the evaluation process. We did hear clear feedback that the neighborhood does not support a school use for the site.

Renovation versus Demolition

During our Feb. 18 Hill East Task Force meeting on the proposed RFO, Michelle Chin and Stephen Campbell of DGS stated that the RFO will be focused on uses for the existing building.

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During our subsequent community meetings, we discussed whether the city should also be open to responses that involve the demolition of the existing building and its replacement with a new structure.

While there is a clear preference for RFO responses that would preserve the existing building and/or its façade, we believe the city should invite and consider responses that would involve demolition of the building. As mentioned above, the building, which is not a historic landmark, has a number of challenges and is in need of significant repair. In addition, the building takes up the entire lot and does not include any space for parking. Construction of a new building may be a more financially viable option by making it easier for a developer or organization to provide and support the community use(s) the neighborhood desires.

If a new building is proposed, we would like to see some nod to the original building's history in the new facility. This could involve adaptive reuse of the existing building's materials, preservation of the building's "autograph" wall or a simple plaque or display in the new building's lobby. A new building should also be similar in size and massing to the existing building, and its façade should fit in with the surrounding neighborhood.

Other Comments on the RFO Process

Funding

Currently, there is no funding for this project in the Mayor's FY15 budget proposal. We strongly urge the Mayor, Council and DGS to pursue any city funding necessary to make this project viable. In 2007, the city purchased the Eastern Branch Building with the intent of keeping it as a neighborhood-serving resource. As this new RFO process moves forward, the city should also be willing to partner with the developer and/or organization ultimately selected to fund necessary building repairs and to make sure that community use(s) in the building are supported.

Recreation

When it was open, the Eastern Branch Boys & Girls Club was the only recreational facility in southeast Hill East. The neighborhood is in desperate need of additional recreational spaces – fields, gyms, open rooms, etc. While we hope that DGS receives RFO responses that envision recreational use for a portion of the building, we understand that the current building is not ideal for large scale recreational use. Other facilities in the neighborhood, including Payne Elementary School and Eastern High School and the largely unused RFK parking lots, are better suited to provide large scale recreational uses if they were open to the community. ANC 6B urges the Mayor, Council, DGS and other city agencies to invest in these facilities so that they can be open and active recreational facilities on nights and weekends.

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Lease Length

During our February 18 task force meeting, Ms. Chin and Mr. Campbell stated that DGS will be offering a 20-year lease to the selected developer or organization. Given the amount of investment needed and the clear risk that any interested developer or organization would have to take to redevelop the building, we feel that the lease terms should be significantly lengthened. As an example, the city-owned Hill Center at Old Naval Hospital is currently leased to the Old Naval Hospital Foundation for a period of 99 years. We fear that a 20-year lease will deter developers and organizations from submitting responses to the RFO. We suggest that DGS consider offering at least a 60-year lease in the RFO.

Response Period

Ms. Chin and Mr. Campbell also indicated that the response period for the RFO would be 30 days. We strongly urge DGS to allow at least a 60 day response period to ensure that the RFO is communicated widely and that interested developers and organizations have enough time to put together detailed responses.

Impact on Surrounding Neighborhood

Successful responses to the RFO should detail how proposed uses will impact the surrounding neighborhood. Nearby residents are particularly concerned about parking, since the site currently does not include parking spaces, and potential noise from new uses. The RFO should specifically ask developers and organizations to provide detailed plans to mitigate parking, noise and any other concerns that could negatively impact nearby neighbors.

Costs

We understand that the most recent comprehensive analysis of the building, including projected cost estimates for repairs, was completed in 2009. Since that time, the building has continued to sit vacant and deteriorate. An updated comprehensive analysis of the building with cost estimates would give potential developers and organizations a sense of the level of investments needed to fully repair the building. We urge DGS to conduct such an analysis prior to release of the RFO.

DGS may also want to seek an estimate on demolition costs or specifically require that respondents who plan to raze the building provide such an estimate in their response.

Public Hearing

We understand that DGS plans to hold a public hearing prior to releasing the RFO for the Eastern Branch Building. We recommend that this hearing be held at Payne Elementary School, 1445 C Street SE. Holding the hearing at Payne, which is only two blocks from the Eastern Branch Building, will ensure that nearby neighbors and interested residents can attend, participate and provide feedback.

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Evaluation of Responses

Once the RFO period has closed and DGS has identified viable responses, we expect that the community, through ANC 6B, will have an opportunity to weigh in on the responses. We are more than willing to work with your department to find venues, dates and times where the community can view presentations by the respondents and ask questions about their proposals.

We want to thank you for your commitment to re-activating the Eastern Branch Building and for reaching out to our commission and the community for input on the RFO process. We also want to recognize the valuable work done by members of Ward 6 Councilmember Tommy Wells' Eastern Branch Task Force. We used their 2009 report and recommendations as a starting point for our community discussions.

Please feel free to contact us if you have any further questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "B. Flahaven", with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

Brian Flahaven
Chair

cc: The Honorable Tommy Wells, Councilmember, Ward 6