

An open letter to my friend, Mayor Taylor, from Mary Hathaway

Chris, you recently wrote a letter to the citizens of Ann Arbor in which you urged us to vote against Proposal A, a Charter Amendment that would preserve the Library Lot as a publicly-owned site for the future creation of an urban park and civic center. You warned that voting “yes” would cause all sorts of bad things.

“The passage of City Proposal A will sentence the Library Lot to remain what it is today: desolate and uninviting.”

What happened to the Chris Taylor who was upbeat and positive? Why does an urban park evoke such pessimism? Downtown parks can be well-designed attractions. In other cities they even serve as economic engines, giving vitality to the surrounding neighborhood. Why do you assume the worst for our city?

Can we examine some of your assumptions? Perhaps if I can show you that you're looking at this the wrong way, then you'll be cheery again.

Assumption 1. “We will lose hundreds of units of new, permanent affordable housing.”

We all want more, truly affordable housing. You and others on Council set a goal of creating over 3,000 new units of affordable housing by 2035. The question is, what's the best way to achieve that goal? Your answer is to sell public land to Core Spaces, a Chicago developer specializing in luxury student apartments, and allocate \$5 million to the housing trust fund. Does \$5 million really buy 200 to 500 new units of affordable housing? Part of the City's tentative deal is a payback to Core Spaces of \$1.5 million (from the DDA) to get 9 units of “workforce” housing. At that rate, you would get only 30 units of somewhat affordable housing for \$5 million. Perhaps the City got a bad deal from Core Spaces—or is \$167,000 a good price for an apartment you don't own? Most people have no idea how you will leverage \$5 million to create 500 units. Do you?

Assumption 2. We will “miss out on millions of dollars of tax revenue to support basic city services.”

The City is not starved for tax revenue. The assessed taxable value of Ann Arbor properties is at a historic high. We have unprecedented new construction downtown. The number of downtown residents has more than doubled since 2010, from 3,000 to around 7,000 and that number is rapidly increasing. Ann Arbor's economic survival doesn't hinge on the projected revenue from any one development. The City has no excuse if it fails to fund basic services. However, basic services for all of these new downtown residents should include more public open space.

Assumption 3. We will “be forced to either raise taxes or re-allocate millions of parks dollars to build and operate a failed park in the middle of our downtown”

Chris, you will be relieved to learn that nobody will be forced to do anything. The Charter Amendment will prevent the sale of public land to a private developer, but other than designating it as an urban park and civic center, Proposal A will not impose any particular vision for what that will look like. The people of Ann Arbor will decide what they want their park and civic center to be. We've offered some ideas, but the hope is that the community will create a collective vision. As for a definition of a *commons*: "land or resources belonging to or affecting the whole of a community."

The vision comes first. Next, the City designates the location. Only then do we determine how to pay for it. That's the approach taken to create Ann Arbor's popular skate park. It is the approach that you have taken for the new train station and the long awaited greenway trail. It is unfair to require that a downtown park and civic center should begin with funding before the location is designated or the design process begun.

I can see your predicament. You and a Council majority have entered a complicated real estate transaction in which the sale of one public property, the Library Lot, finances the repurchase of another property, the Y Lot. You are telling us that we must sell one piece of public land because we have to buy back another parcel across the street. The original rationale for buying back the Y Lot was that it had appreciated in value and the City could "flip" the property by buying it back and selling it for twice the money. Did you have the financing all lined up for this deal when you rushed the repurchase forward last spring? Do you think that Ann Arbor's city government should be involved in high stakes real estate speculation?

Someone put it this way: "The Mayor has painted himself into a corner." Well, suppose you were doing a home project and you literally painted yourself into a corner. What would you do? I think you would join the laughter and free yourself by tip-toeing through the wet paint. Mistakes can be fixed—and forgiven.

You list all sorts of benefits that will flow from the CORE plan: "...activity, with developer funded open space and ground floor retail open for everyone." But you see only "failure" and "desolation" resulting from competing visions. You use the one existing downtown park as a warning, "Our current urban park, Liberty Plaza, it's fair to say, does not meet our community aspirations." If there is a need for improvement of that park, as mayor shouldn't you do something to fix it? You've been on City Council since 2008 and served as mayor since 2014; even served as a Council representative on the Parks Advisory Commission (PAC). What is your plan for meeting community aspirations for downtown parks?

You often cite the Parks Advisory Commission's 2013 report on Downtown Parks and Open Space. This report resulted from a year-long study process by a PAC subcommittee. I attended all the meetings of this subcommittee as an observer, and I kept notes. The subcommittee gathered input, including an online survey in which 76% of respondents said there was a need for more parks and open space in the downtown. The respondents

strongly favored a park on the Library Lot. The report had other favorable things to say about creating a public park on the Library Lot, but the only part of the report that you cite are the restrictive criteria. You don't mention that you yourself proposed these edits to make the recommendations more restrictive of a park and more pro-development. You then orchestrated the insertion of these edits into the PAC report at the last minute. I was there. Do you think it is right for the mayor to substantively modify a study by a commission and then repeatedly cite that part of the report as an independent confirmation of his point of view? Come on!

You and the City administration are pushing the sale of the Library Lot to a private developer as if it is the only major real estate project in Ann Arbor. It is not. There have been 17 large-scale projects since 2010 and there are 35-40 more projects either approved or under construction. Long before there was a written contract, you rushed the vote to sell the Library Lot in April 2017 when you had the 8-vote majority. Indeed, it took 13 months to work through enough of the details to produce a purchase agreement in May 2018. This fall, the City is still rushing to finish pieces of the deal. This reckless hurry to vote on a multi-million dollar sale of public land is political. The race to finish is about your eroding majority on Council, isn't it? In rushing forward without proper oversight, the City has violated its own Charter and put itself at risk of a flawed agreement.

By retaining public land at the center of the city, we can take a more holistic approach to planning for development on the Library Block. Rather than looking at a parcel in isolation and insisting on maximum development of a 17-story tower (or one even taller than that), we should look for an integrative approach that strengthens the relationships between the neighboring structures and welcomes pedestrian movement. Planning for this should begin immediately after voters approve Proposal A. Participants should include not only representatives of Council, Planning Department, Parks Department, and the Historic District Commission, but also owners of properties on the block (Library, First Martin, Denali, UM Credit Union, and smaller structures), nearby properties (Blake Transit Station, former Y lot). And interested citizens should fully participate.

There is still time to pause before we lose this opportunity. The rush to privatize the Library Lot and erect a luxury tower is not your only option, Chris. I think that you personally and the City will benefit much more by adjusting to the new balance on Council and learning to work together in a different way. You have four years to demonstrate your leadership and establish a really great legacy.

We can all win with City Proposal A. Christopher, I invite you to join me in voting "YES".

Sincerely,
Mary Hathaway