

Honorable Mayor Sam Liccardo, and Members of the Council, City of San José
200 E. Santa Clara St., San José, CA 95113
via email, sent Feb. 22, 2019

re: March 12th Council Agenda: Site Selection for “The Light Tower” iconic structure gift.

Dear Mayor Liccardo and San José Councilmembers,

We on the San José Parks and Recreation Commission were asked in December to “Accept the status report of the San Jose Light Tower Corporation (SJLTC) regarding the Site Selection Study results and the concept of an International Ideas Competition.” The study recommended selecting Arena Green as the site for the gift of an “iconic structure”. At the Commission meeting, I made the motion that passed to decline approving the recommendation and instead to defer the selection of the site to you on the City Council, and to ask that you first clarify various issues, address some concerns, and establish the necessary design constraints. The recent SJLTC public outreach meeting addressed some of these issues, but many remain. I am writing this letter, as an individual, to give some background for my motion.

As I told the chair of the San Jose Light Tower Corp., Steve Borkenhagen, I agree that San Jose lacks an iconic image for itself -- even the San José Parks Dept. used the 280/87 freeway interchange for the cover photo for its 2000 “GreenPrint”. I appreciate SJLTC’s generous offer to donate to San José an art structure that could become an iconic image for the city. However, I was concerned by details of the site-selection trade matrix, and I couldn’t approve giving “a blank canvas” (to “not constrain the creative spirit”) for a project that lacked adequate design guidelines, constraints, specifications, and review processes. And, as a life-long advocate for creeks and trails and parks and the environment, I feel a special sense of protectiveness for the Los Gatos Creek and Guadalupe River at Confluence Point in Arena Green. Also, I feel an icon is something that is chosen by the public, not given by a donor.

What makes an icon? Not every big city has an icon, and not every city icon is big. Seattle has the Space Needle, Paris has the Eiffel Tower – and, before that, San José had The Light Tower, a scale-model of which now resides in our History Park. (San José was also famous for the waters of Alum Rock, the first park in California: maybe we could have a fountain?) An icon does not have to be merely some ornamental structure: it can be something useful, like San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge or Sydney Australia’s famous Opera House. It doesn’t need to be large: Chicago is famous for its silvery “Bean”, and Copenhagen Denmark’s “Little Mermaid” statue is barely life-sized. It doesn’t even have to be a structure: San Antonio Texas is rightfully famous for its “River Walk”. And it doesn’t have to be downtown: think of LA’s famous Hollywood sign. Representatives of the San Jose Light Tower Corporation said that they want to hold an international design competition for any and all ideas for an icon, but when the sponsor has “Light Tower” in the name, one is likely to get a Light Tower as the submitted design.

The Parks & Rec Commission was asked to approve the selection of Arena Green as the site for this gift. The site selection was based on a weighted scoring of selection criteria. There were no constraints on the amount of land to be given over to this icon: is it the small footprint of a Mermaid-sized statue, or is it the entire footprint of the park? The briefing document showed an all-encompassing envelope covering 240,000 sq.ft: would the public lose their free access to much or all of the park? What about the trail connections? Also, Arena Green is in the airport’s flight-path: an icon there could only be the size of a typical transmission tower and just half the height of the original tower, and it wouldn’t even be seen by airline passengers. I also expressed a number of concerns about the site selection process itself:

- The trade was from a quite limited selection of sites: mainly a few of the downtown city parks. Coyote Meadows (with the landfill just across I-280 from downtown) was not considered, nor City Hall Plaza, nor any private land. I feel that if this is going to be a “gift” to the City, it could include a gift of the land as well, rather than costing the public its access to one of our parks.

- The scoring seemed capricious. For example, Discovery Meadows was given a low score in part due to “poor public transit”, even though there’s both a light-rail station and a major bus stop right there on the site’s perimeter.
- The scoring was skewed: “environmental influences” were interpreted to mean impacts to the gift rather than impacts by the gift. The report recommended Arena Green in part because of the “little environmental influences thanks to the flood control systems” and that the area is “free of heritage trees and historical influences” – there was no consideration given to the impact of noise and light on the sensitive riparian (creekside) habitat or the bird flyways. Arena Green is one of the most environmentally sensitive parks evaluated, and the presented plan even disrespected San José’s Riparian Setbacks with an envelope that encroached on the Los Gatos Creek. (The charts presented at the public outreach meeting did show a larger setback.)

The donors plan an international competition, with the design selected by a jury of international judges. I’m sure they all will have the best of intentions, but I have seen past committees elsewhere approve statues of Confederate generals in the American South, statues of Lenin for Eastern Europe, or even gilded statues of the donors. And we need to avoid accepting the classic “White Elephant” – a “prestigious” gift that can’t be used and that is expensive to maintain. The City needs to maintain control over the final approval process, and to involve the public in the design specification and selection process.

My requests of you on the City Council:

- Discuss what San José wants in the way of an “icon”. Ask the public: should it be some squat Light Tower or other ornamental structure or object, or could it be something more “useful”? Could the donors combine resources with others, perhaps, for example, contributing towards making a more magnificent and iconic station for the trains, BART, and High Speed Rail; or helping to build a truly iconic HSR bridge/entranceway into San José; or maybe restoring a natural habitat and creating a “San José-style” River Walk along the Los Gatos Creek.
- Consider alternative sites: Discovery Meadows, Coyote Meadows, City Hall Plaza, non-downtown sites, even non-city-parklands. If it is to be at a city park, put an upper limit on the amount of public land to be given over to the icon, and assure that the trail network is not degraded.
- Respect the riparian habitat: no incompatible development anywhere near the 100-foot setback zone; no light directed into the habitat; control of contaminants, runoff, public impacts, noise, soil compaction, etc.
- Respect the birds: the creeks are natural flyways, and whatever project is selected should be designed to avoid distracting or imperiling the birds: no lights directed into the bird flyways, no windows or glass panes, and no wire meshes or other hazards.
- Avoid negative impacts to the city: no lights flashing at the aircraft taking off from San José International, or shining into the windows of downtown high-rises.
- Require City oversight: an International Selection Committee can assist with the design competition, but the Parks & Rec. Commission, Arts Commission, and Historic Landmarks Commission should all review the design criteria prior to the competition and the resulting proposed designs; the City should follow the CEQA process; the Council should have to give final approval to any project before being authorized to proceed; and the public should be involved at every step.

The SJLTC is offering San José the gift of an iconic structure that could be a welcome addition to the city: I truly hope that a properly designed and properly situated gift will be a welcomed icon for the city. This is to be the gift of a lifetime: please involve the public and take the time to assure that it is done right.

~Lawrence Ames

cc: City Manager; City Clerk; PRNS Dept.; Parks & Rec Cmsn.; Riparian Advocates; SJ Park Advocates; D3 & D6 Neighborhood Leader Groups; SPUR; San José Light Tower Corp.