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Public's insights could solve dilemma over Century Park

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After plenty of banter about the proposed Century Park wall at the Washington State History Museum in downtown Tacoma, it was time for solutions. I put out a call on my blog for readers to submit sketches of their ideas to solve how they think Century Park should be put together.

Of the proposals I received, there were a handful that could satisfy the needs of all parties involved. First, some perspective.

Last month, bloggers noticed and wrote about the removal of an iron fence between the museum and Union Station that was to be replaced by a brick wall. After prompting by City Council member Julie Anderson, the city issued a stop-work order over concerns about an easement and what a wall might mean for security and safety in the area.

Renderings of the proposed wall were then published, and other concerns about pedestrian access and view corridors arose. From there, little in the way of constructive conversation took place other than opposing and constantly restated opinions.

Once Anderson's op-ed article was published (TNT, 10-22), I was inspired to use the points of concern she identified to come up with viable solutions.

Those points, in case you don't recall, were that any solution needed to strive to increase museum patronage, honor donors and enhance pedestrian traffic. The challenge I issued was for readers of my Web site to come up with sketches of the area where Century Park is to be created. I asked that they keep in mind Anderson's points and to genuinely try to meet the needs of all parties involved.

The results of this request are realistic and promising, especially in combination. One standout idea is creating a path with posts and/or planters to block motor traffic where the former fence stood along Pacific Avenue. Jutting out from the Union Station side of the area just past the cafe would be a rectangular fountain designed "bench-style."

Water would be pushed a foot or so from the surface in a bubbling effect, and inside the fountain, perched atop poles above the water, would sit the donor plaques completely lining the perimeter.

Other submissions suggest adding features like kiosks for museum ads, new access doors for the cafe, planters for some greenery and even a glass awning for some shelter in soggy weather.

The Century Park fountain design accounts for security concerns by both preventing vehicle access to the side of the courthouse as well as leaving the area open and visible to police patrols. With barriers on the Pacific entrance to the area, there would be no need for a fence or wall blocking views of Union Station.

Pedestrian concerns are met by opening up another pathway to and from downtown and the Foss. The fountain itself would be long enough not to completely block direct passage of foot traffic but act instead to "eddy" or slow visitors through the area and even direct them toward the cafe and History Museum.

The "bench style" design of the water feature provides a perfect place for rest and contemplation, while the burbling water helps to dampen road and freeway noise. Views in and of the area are preserved, since no obstructions would likely reach much higher than four or five feet or be a completely solid barrier.

City and museum leaders need to take note and seriously consider how to integrate balanced ideas like ours into a solution everyone in Tacoma can be proud of. These sketches show people really care and want to be engaged to help shape downtown for the better. Decision makers need to understand that donations of ideas and vision are just as important as financial donations. Until then, all we'll have are walls blocking the path to Tacoma's destiny.

Kevin Freitas blogs about Tacoma and other topics at www.kevinfreitas.net.

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