

JFK Plaza/LOVE Park Stakeholder Meeting Notes

The Stakeholder Meeting for the redesign of JFK Plaza/LOVE Park was held on November 4th, 2014 at the Municipal Services Building, 1401 JFK Boulevard. Stakeholders included residential, commercial, civic, institutional, and non-profit groups surrounding JFK Plaza/LOVE Park. A total of 20 individuals attended. The meeting agenda included:

- Welcome by Michael DiBerardinis, Deputy Mayor, Environmental and Community Resources City of Philadelphia
- Review of garage sale, retention of PennPraxis and HR&A and selection of design team by Mark A. Focht, First Deputy Commissioner, Philadelphia Parks and Recreation
- Presentation of the HR&A Financial Analysis for JFK Plaza/LOVE Park by Kathryn Ott Lovell, Executive Director, Fairmount Park Conservancy
- An overview presentation including an introduction to the civic engagement completed since September 2014 and a review of best practices based on the engagement and principles for the redesign by Bridget Keegan Barber, Interim Director of PennPraxis.

The presentation concluded with a series of questions posed to the stakeholders to facilitate discussion and generate feedback to further inform the civic visioning process.

Below you will find the questions posed to the meeting attendees and notes on the feedback they produced.

Questions Posed

- 1) What are the elements of JFK Plaza/ LOVE Park that make it successful today?
- 2) How do we address the dual role of JFK Plaza/LOVE Park as both a huge tourist destination and a community space?
- 3) What can we do to update or add to the park in order to ensure it succeeds as a model public space?
- 4) What can we do to ensure that the park can sustain itself?

Themes from the Discussion

Maintenance & Security: The importance of improving both maintenance and security once the site is renovated and reopened to the public.

Gateway Role: JFK Plaza/ LOVE park as the gateway to the Parkway and the Parkway as a gateway to Fairmount Park. The importance of the site as a gateway to Center City from the Parkway and the City's northwestern neighborhoods and suburbs.

Access: Pedestrian-Bike connectivity and accessibility, permeability, strength of scale & layout of the park.

Enhanced Programming & Amenities: Extended food truck & performance hours into evenings and weekends.

Discussion Notes by Theme

Maintenance & Security

Maintenance and security were the two largest themes of the meeting, frequently in relation to one another. Maintenance and security were seen as vital for sustainability and quality of both the park and user experience. The discussion points which led to these themes are given below:

- *Redesigning the Park and the Approach to it:* The cleanliness of the park was an issue for many. Stakeholders focused on not just how often it is cleaned but also how it looks once it has been cleaned. Many stakeholders indicated that the materials used in the most recent park renovation (2000) have not stood the test of time. In redesigning the park, it was noted that there is an opportunity to utilize higher quality materials and furniture which have a longer life span and can handle the wear and tear of the many people using JFK Plaza/LOVE Park each day. This would not only make the space easier to clean, it would also continue to look clean and polished for many years to come.
- *Upkeep is Essential:* In conjunction with incorporating high-quality materials into the design, many stakeholders repeatedly indicated that a dedicated cleaning staff is essential to ensure a high level of maintenance. Having a clean park is part of the overall experience and the key is for maintenance staff to be able to respond to issues immediately. Generally, the group called for more trash receptacles and recycling stations. Everyone recognized that a higher level of maintenance does not come for free; but, the high profile, central nature of this space calls for an outstanding level of maintenance.
- *First Impressions:* JFK Plaza/LOVE Park is an important tourist destination. However, stakeholders generally did not believe that tourists actually stay in the park. The redesign, combined with maintenance and security, presents the opportunity for Philadelphia to make a lasting, good impression on tourists. Currently, the LOVE sculpture is what makes the impression. Embrace the opportunity to extend that impression beyond the sculpture itself.
- *Off Hours:* The conditions of the park in the morning and evening, as well as the reduced physical security, were of concern for attendees at the meeting. Currently, there are many morning commuters, evening commuters, and tourists who visit the park during off hours and weekends (times other than the 9am-5pm). Large amounts of litter can be seen in the early morning before maintenance has occurred and this detracts from the overall pedestrian experience. For some locals, these conditions are enough for them to avoid using the park on their morning commute or as a neighborhood space. Additionally, an attendee noted that they frequently see camera flashes going off at night, noting that tourists are still visiting the park once the sun has gone down and that maintenance must continue beyond the regular 9am-5pm schedule. Continued traffic within and through the park should be accompanied by continued security and maintenance. Installing security cameras, extending amenities/programming, and improving lighting were all discussed as possible means to mitigate these concerns.

Gateway Role

JFK Plaza/LOVE Park's role as a gateway was mentioned and supported by various meeting attendees. The park is both a gateway to the Parkway and an important node in the larger gateway to Fairmount Park. As such, the redesign should be tied into and aligned with the design, aesthetic, and horticultural theme of the Parkway. Additionally the iconic vista of the Parkway should continue to be honored. JFK Plaza/LOVE Park is seen as a nexus for celebrations and this redesign presents an opportunity to embrace being in a great urban setting. Discussion centered the following ideas:

- *Robust horticulture and landscaping:* The greening of the park should be tied to the landscape experienced/seen along the length of the Parkway. Within JFK Plaza/LOVE Park, horticulture should be embraced and the garden features of the Parkway should be drawn further into the park. JFK Plaza/LOVE Park naturally serves as a kick-off or grand entrance to the Parkway therefore horticultural opportunities should be included in the redesign.
- *Balance between horticulture and hardscape:* There was a recognition that while there is demand for abundant green space, there is also a tradition of hardscape in JFK Plaza/LOVE Park which provides space for many of the activities which make the Park so unique (social gatherings, performances, rallies, Christmas Village).
- *Connectivity along the Parkway:* JFK Plaza/LOVE Park should be connected to the rest of the Parkway both visually and through wayfinding. It should complement the newly redesigned Dilworth Park and be easily accessible from both Dilworth Park and Cret Park. The fountain and fountain basin were seen by some at the meeting as too large and imposing, taking up valuable real estate in the park as well as obscuring the grand view of the Parkway. Many noted that the view is so much greater when the fountain is turned off.
- *Scale:* JFK Plaza/LOVE Park is special in that it manages to combine both the intimate scale and the grand scale. Stakeholders felt strongly that the redesign does not have to sacrifice one for the other.

Access

Access to the Park was discussed both in the physical and social sense:

- *Physical Access:*
 - *Edges:* The largest deterrents to access are the impermeable edges of the park. The edges ensure that the park is not user-friendly. The high walls on 15th Street, the lack of any access points along JFK Boulevard, and the general low lying walls that surround the rest of the park are both physical and mental blockages for people thinking of using the park. Leveling the park so that it is at street level, opening the edges through both the removal of walls and removal of parking along the edges will make the park more accessible. This also serves to heighten visibility which lends to safety and security.

- *Pedestrian Crossings*: Pedestrian accessibility was highlighted as a major challenge at virtually every corner of the park. Generally, stakeholders recommended exploring the possibility of decreasing the distance to cross streets via changes to curblines. In particular, the crossing at 15th & Arch Streets was discussed in great detail. With the opening of the Family Court many more people are expected to utilize the crossing on the northeast side of the park each day, including weekends. It is essential that that the redesign addresses pedestrian accessibility into the park in order to ensure that pedestrians have no trouble entering and exiting the park. Additionally, successful navigation into the park will solidify the park as a true gateway to the Parkway.
- *Bicycle Access*: The idea of having a parking station for bikes was mentioned, whether in the park or in the garage below. A parking station was identified as a possible source for revenue generation whereby members have a reserved bike parking spot. This would effectively reduce the competition that goes on with bicycle commuters vying for limited bike racks and sign poles. Additionally, bicycle racks are most successful when consolidated into a compact space.
- *Programming Infrastructure and Access*: Strategically located curb cuts for food trucks and performance/major event set-up would improve programmability. In conjunction, multiple electric/power hook ups for major events and food trucks would improve working conditions.
- *Social Access*: There was considerable positive discussion surrounding the diversity in use and user groups in JFK Plaza/LOVE Park. This is a space where performers show their talents, locals socialize, rallies and protests gather, tourists take pictures, and the surrounding workforce grab lunch, a snack, or a quick respite from work. One of the qualities of the Park which many saw as an attribute to the diversity of use is the scale of the design and the various realms, or pockets, of space that make up the park. Between the food trucks and stage, fountain, North East corner for shade and leisure, and the tourist area at the LOVE sculpture, many different atmospheres are created. This diversity can also be seen in the workforce who gathers in JFK Plaza/LOVE Park for lunch. One attendee noted that each group has its different lunch area whether it is the office worker, bike messenger, construction worker, etc. There were some criticisms, mainly related to the congestion and chaos that often occurs around the LOVE sculpture, particularly during commuting hours when many use the diagonal of the Park where the LOVE sculpture resides. Finding a way to reduce the congestion around the sculpture would be beneficial for all users.
 - *Identifying New Users*: With the opening of the Family Court at 15th and Arch, the park could see an influx of families and children throughout the week, including weekends. This ought to be considered moving forward. Additionally, with improved connections at 15th and Arch, the park might become more of an attraction for conventioners/tourists.

Enhanced Programming & Amenities

Programming and amenities were generally seen as positive. The largest discussion surrounded the availability of programming and amenities and the need to extend availability to evening hours and weekends. In so doing, meeting attendees believed the park would remain cleaner and more secure by attracting more people who serve as ‘eyes on the park’ instead of allowing it to turn into a dead zone once the work day is through. Discussion focused on the following:

- *Food Trucks:* The food truck scene has been thriving at JFK Plaza/LOVE Park, as well as throughout the city. Currently the operators come to JFK Plaza/LOVE Park during the weekdays with a breakfast shift and a lunch shift, the latter clearing out by 4pm or earlier. Increasing the hours of food truck operators and extending their presence in the park to weekend days would benefit all parties. This would also provide a place for families and tourists who are not there during lunch hours to purchase a snack or a bottle of water. Adding monthly or bi-monthly events to the food truck schedule could help attract different users and bring new people to the park. Providing food trucks with a comfortable dining experience during the winter was discussed. Suggestions included the use of space heaters and temporary structures. To reduce the noise of the food trucks, an attendee suggested increased electrical hookups so that the need to rely on loud generators is reduced.
- *Programming:* One attendee noted that while the confluence of food trucks and performances during the weekdays is a great way to draw people in, there is no comfortable way to enjoy both at the same time. The space surrounding the stage area provides no seating save for the garden bed ledges on each side. There are a few table tops at the food trucks, but they have no seats. Thus, creating a performance space that really considers the entire space and how to accommodate viewers as well as performers could help to retain more people who may come to eat and more successfully connect these two offerings. The option of adding a café to the park has been repeatedly mentioned by both the public and stakeholders. However, it is important to note the abundance of café's in-and-around the park. In response, stakeholders mentioned building on the success of the curated food truck calendar and incorporating a kiosk that might sell beer and wine which could help create an evening/weekend dining option in JFK Plaza/LOVE Park.
- *Water Feature:* Stakeholders reiterated the importance of the water feature and pointed to many parks throughout Philly and the world that have witnessed increased park attendance due to interactive water features. However, as stated above, the fountain and fountain basin were seen by some at the meeting as too large and imposing. The group encouraged considering rethinking the basin so that it can accommodate various uses.
- *Tables and Chairs:* Moveable tables and chairs were repeatedly cited as essential amenities that allow for quiet conversations and larger gatherings.
- *Restroom Facilities:* Restroom facilities were highlighted as a need for vendors, event participants/organizers, and park users.
- *Flexibility:* The overall message in terms of programming and amenities was to make sure that JFK Plaza/LOVE Park remains a flexible, active space. The group reiterated that this space serves as the city's town square and the redesign should work to enhance how people are already using the space.