

MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and City Council

FROM: Ben Gagnon, Special Projects Planner

THRU: N/A

DATE OF MEMO: May 2, 2008

MEETING DATE: May 6, 2008

RE: ZG Master Plan Report

REQUEST OF COUNCIL: Staff is requesting that the Council review and discuss the information provided and provide direction for the future regarding a formal land use review process.

PREVIOUS COUNCIL ACTION: At the April 28 Council meeting, Council requested a report on the ZG Master Plan process, starting with the appropriation of \$50,000 for the project, as well as a focus on how uses were established.

BACKGROUND: Staff has provided eight exhibits showing various key stages of the process since May 2006. These memos reflect what staff believes to be a consistent goal of moving toward a COWOP process. The memos also contain information on certain uses and when they entered the process. For example, both the 5/15/06 (Exhibit A) and the 8/15/06 memo (Exhibit B) identifies “potential applicants.”

A memo from November 2006 (Exhibit C) includes the \$50,000 request from Council to launch a “master planning” process. Staff had originally envisioned hiring an outside consultant to run this process, and a draft scope of work from RNL Design is attached to the 11/06 memo. Staff subsequently decided that the master planning work could be done in-house, more efficiently and more cost-effectively, especially considering the abilities of Jason Lasser of Community Development.

An Agreement to Initiate Joint Planning (Exhibit D/Resolution No. 19, Series of 2007) was the next step toward a planning process. Rather than enter into a major contract with RNL Design, staff simply asked them to run a two-day charrette, leaving further planning steps to be determined. This document includes a document attached that lists the parties and a timeline.

The work accomplished at the charrette is reflected in Exhibit E, which shows several different versions of a site plan, as well as different uses in different locations. The document also shows “pros and cons” discussed by the charrette members, which included about 35 people.

The five parties identified in Resolution No. 19, Series of 2007, met together after the charrette and determined that the best way to move forward was through an informal public process intended to involve as broad a cross-section of the public as possible. The next public meeting was held in August 2007, and focused on the at-grade site plan – including pedestrian movement, open space and view corridors rather than massing and heights of buildings. Exhibit F shows the notes that were taken from that meeting, when approximately 55 people attended.

In November 2007, another public meeting was held so the parties could talk about “why they should be located at this site and why the space is needed,” according to the newspaper advertisement (Exhibit G). Approximately 75 people jammed into the Council Chambers for this meeting, and almost all the parties took more than the 10 minutes allotted to go through their powerpoints (and a DVD for the Chamber). Some technical problems delayed the meeting, and because we didn’t expect that many people, the food ran out quickly. Once we had taken several questions and comments, the crowd began to leave. There was no “thumbs exercise” at this meeting, and staff can’t locate any notes on the meeting. Staff does recall Kent Reid and June Kirk objecting to the design for Galena Plaza, wanting more open space and fewer buildings; and Steve Seyffert objecting to the size of government offices; as well as an audience member who wanted the Art Museum to remain at its current site. There was also a strongly supportive comment from Sue Smedstad, a former Civic Master Plan Advisory Group member. The ZG Partnership then produced a 55-minute version of the presentations made at this meeting that was shown extensively on GrassRootsTV (Exhibit G).

In March 2008, a large public meeting was held at the Jerome Hotel to show a 3D version of the site plan, with results from the “thumbs exercise” attached as Exhibit H.

DISCUSSION: This portion of the memo will focus on how the various uses at the ZG site evolved into the ZG Partnership. In all cases, the parties emerged from the Civic Master Plan. Exhibit F contains excerpts from the Civic Master Plan regarding these uses – this document was a hand-out at the August 2007 public meeting.

Pitkin County

In 2005, the Pitkin County Facility Feasibility Analysis generated an alternative option that would locate a substantial amount of County offices just west of the Aspen Airport Business Center, along Highway 82.

The CMPAG found that, “Removing civic functions from the downtown will tend to reduce the kind of community character that still makes the core of Aspen a ‘traditional’ downtown, surrounded by a resort environment.”

The CMPAG recommended that “the City of Aspen collaborate with Pitkin County during the Facility Feasibility Analysis in order to review and evaluate the scope of potential civic uses at the Zupancis property.”

The CMPAG recommended that “the City of Aspen collaborate with Pitkin County during the Facility Feasibility Analysis in order to review and evaluate the scope of potential civic uses ... including ... the former Youth Center.”

During the charrette process, some proposals showed Pitkin County offices at the former Youth Center site and on the Rio Grande Parking lots, but the majority of the attendees ultimately preferred the Zupancis site. The County also prefers the Zupancis site, partly because it can be consolidated with the County-owned County Plaza site next door, and is therefore large enough to accommodate a consolidate County campus. Also critical is that the topography allows for substantial underground parking. This is an important part of the County program, not only to accommodate judges and juries and County residents coming to Aspen to do County business, but also to accommodate County fleet vehicles. Finally, the sub-grade area can also accommodate public safety vehicles and public safety functions such as evidence storage, interview rooms, a forensic lab, a locker/exercise room and possibly jail-related functions.

Based on the County’s work with RNL Design regarding space needs – as well as the ZG Partnership’s examination of a responsible level of development at the Zupancis site – it appears that the space needs of the County, the 9th Judicial District, the Aspen Police Department and the Housing Authority can be accommodated on the Zupancis Property.

However, the ZG Partnership has proposed as part of a potential COWOP process to revisit these space needs in anticipation of the higher level of public scrutiny that comes with the potential use of public land.

City of Aspen

With regard to the City of Aspen’s office space, the Civic Master Plan recognized that “The City of Aspen’s space limitations require a long-term solution to ensure quality service.”

At this time, the City operates out of 6 different downtown sites. There is about 20,000 square feet at City Hall, and approximately 15,000 square feet spread out at the Hopkins St. Building/Engineering Dept, the Transportation Dept in the basement of the Yellow Brick, the GIS and Asset Departments at the Rio Grande building, the Parking Department in a ranch house at the Zupancis property and the Canary Initiative and others at an office above Asie Restaurant on Main Street.

This “leakage” from City Hall is not entirely surprising, as City government has been located at City Hall since the 1950s – and much has changed since that time. The City’s situation mirrors the problem the County has faced over the years: As services expanded to meet complex community needs, government offices have been located haphazardly. Both the City and County are now looking to consolidate their operations in a more rational way, both for greater customer service and internal efficiencies that ultimately serve the public better.

While the City is considering office space in an expanded version of the current ACRA building site, the City is also exploring options closer to City Hall – seeking a City Hall Annex solution. This effort is ongoing.

Shared Meeting Hall

The CMPAG made the following findings:

1. The existing meeting space for the City of Aspen and Pitkin County is not adequate.
2. The design of meeting space currently used by the City and the County do not reflect the importance of the discussions, debates and decisions being made.
3. A City-County Meeting Hall is an appropriate shared use, considering the existing need and the similar purpose of the use. A shared Meeting Hall would avoid a duplication of costs.
4. A Civic Meeting Hall should be close to downtown government offices, adjacent to outdoor public space and at a prominent site that conveys a sense of significance.
5. A Civic Meeting Hall should be designed so that it can be available for a variety of uses by the general public as well as government meetings.
6. Logistical issues between the City and the County regarding a shared Meeting Hall will need to be addressed.

Considering the fourth finding (above), **the CMPAG recommended** the following sites as “appropriate for a Meeting Hall”:

- The former Youth Center
- The north edge of Galena Plaza
- The Zupancis Property

Since the Civic Master Plan was adopted, there have not been extensive discussion regarding the City Council and the Board of County Commissioners attempting to share a meeting hall, but the few discussions that have occurred do not strongly support the idea. However, the ZG Site plan currently includes a large multi-purpose meeting room at the north edge of Galena Plaza that would function much as the Rio Grande Meeting Room functions today but in a substantially larger and more functional space.

Aspen Art Museum

In 2005, **the CMPAG made the following recommendation:** “The CMPAG supports the Aspen Art Museum’s exploration of downtown locations in collaboration with the City of Aspen.”

During the charrette process, one scenario showed the Art Museum at the Zupancis site, while the three others showed it bordering Galena Plaza in various configurations. Ultimately the majority of the charrette attendees preferred seeing the Art Museum next to Galena Plaza largely because of the vitality the museum could bring to the site. There was also a recognition that nighttime events at the museum would make good use of the Rio Grande Garage, which is typically empty at night.

The Art Museum came to prefer the Youth Center site for a variety of reasons, including one that was suggested by the Civic Master Plan. **The CMPAG recommended** that, “In conjunction with the future renovation or replacement of the former Youth Center, the CMPAG recommends

that the east edge of Galena Plaza be considered in the future as a built edge, extending to the existing stairwell/elevator feature, and including compelling architectural elements intended to draw pedestrians across Main Street.”

The museum intends to engage an architect with an international profile to work with a local architect on a museum at this site to build a “signature building,” recalling the effort to bring renowned architects like Herbert Bayer and Eero Saarinen to Aspen in the late 1940s. This reflects Core Principle #8 in the Civic Master Plan: “The display and presentation of arts and cultural events is a core element of Aspen’s identity as a unique community in a competitive resort environment, and Aspen should build upon this intrinsic asset at every opportunity.”

Other non profit arts groups have been involved in the discussion about locating around Galena Plaza. During the Civic Master Plan process, Theatre Aspen led an effort to plan for a shared-use arts facility, and while Filmfest and the Writers Foundation showed some interest, the effort dissolved when Theatre Aspen dropped the idea in favor of trying to replace its existing tent. At times during the Civic Master Plan process, various different board members of the Santa Fe Ballet visited City staff to talk about the potential of working with Theatre Aspen. During these discussions, it became clear that the two groups needed dramatically different designs for the stage area. A Toronto-based consultant working for the Wheeler Opera House at the time also advised staff that trying to accommodate dance and theatre uses at one site was rarely, if ever, successful.

Also, the Civic Master Plan stated that if the Wheeler Opera House was to move forward with a proposal to build on the vacant lot next door, that site would likely accommodate the needs of local arts groups. In addition, a consultant hired by the Wheeler -- Michael Strong -- warned of too much performance space, saying “Any plans to expand the Wheeler ... should only be done ... with an eye toward partnerships that will severely limit or eliminate the threat of significant dark periods for all of its performance and usage spaces.”

The Art Museum emerged as an organization that is already staffed and programmed to operate a facility on a day-to-day basis consistently throughout the year. This is in contrast to many other arts groups, who organize their staff around two or more major special events per year. This state of affairs places the Art Museum in the position of partnering with arts groups to use the facility. A list of partnerships is included as Exhibit I.

Finally, the topography of the former Youth Center site is an important consideration. The site plan has calculate that approximately 10,400 square feet of sub-grade space can be used at the site. For other users, such as government, this vast amount of sub-grade space would have limited uses – it would not be used for office space, nor for affordable housing, and the engineering needed would not make it cost-effective to expand the garage. On the other hand, such sub-grade space is ideal for a museum that likes to control temperature and light in its gallery spaces.

The CMPAG recommended that if the Art Museum relinquishes its lease (on the current site) in the future, the City “should identify a new use that allows for public interaction; that builds on the intrinsic assets of the site and the building; and that recognizes the challenges of the site.”

Pitkin County Library

When the Rio Grande Garage was built in the mid-1990s, the City of Aspen and Pitkin County exchanged land at the Galena Plaza site. Part of that agreement set aside 44-feet of land to the east of the library – into Galena Plaza – for a future library expansion.

The CMPAG supported an expansion of the Pitkin County Library to the east, and **recommended** that “the design of the building be coordinated with other built edges around Galena Plaza, to the extent possible.”

During the charrette process, the concept of designing a “frame” around the west and south edges of the plaza emerged, and has remained the best concept so far. Rather than building a rectangular expansion directly east into the open space area, this concept would give the library the same amount of space, but in a configuration that respects and even enhances the open space.

ACRA Offices and Visitor Center

Although the Aspen Chamber Resort Association signed a five-year lease with the City in 2005 for its current site on Rio Grande Place, several problems remain. **The CMPAG found** that:

- The constrained office space and lack of basic amenities remain challenges at the existing Visitor Center.
- The lack of visibility, lack of wayfinding and inconvenient location of the existing Visitor Center remain major obstacles to providing optimal services to visitors.

In addition, **The CMPAG found** that, “An optimal location for a Visitor Center would be close to parking and the downtown, and recommended that appropriate sites for a Visitor Center include:

- The former Youth Center
- The north edge of Galena Plaza

More recently, the Chamber has expressed an interest in remaining on the same level with Rio Grande Park, partly so people can park and walk in to the Visitors Center rather than having to enter the garage in order to reach a Visitors Center at the Galena Plaza level.

FINANCIAL/BUDGET IMPACTS: The City set aside \$50,000 for the ZG Master Plan effort in the 2007 budget. The ZG partners split the cost of the \$25,500 charrette roughly according to the size of each party’s interest in space at the ZG site (see Exhibit D/Resolution No. 19, Series of 2007). The City’s share was \$8,925.

Since then, the ZG Partnership has spent \$16,463.54 on the three public meetings, with the largest amount spent on lunch at the Jerome Hotel Ballroom for the March 12 meeting (\$8,462). These funds have not yet been reconciled, but the parties have agreed to pay the \$3,300 each to reimburse the City. However, the chamber has stated from the beginning that it is not willing to contribute funds to the process. The City has told the Chamber that when a new lease is negotiated, these costs will be negotiated as part of a new lease agreement.

Once the City has been reimbursed, the City will have spent about \$12,300 as its share of the informal public process in the past 13 months. In addition, the City has spent \$12,650 in order to get accurate and up-to-date floor plans for all City office spaces as part of an in-house space needs study, as well as \$1,275 on an analysis of the Zupancis-McMurtchy cabins that predated the ZG Partnership.

CITY MANAGER COMMENTS: _____

EXHIBITS:

- A – Staff memo 5/15/06
- B – Staff memo 8/15/06
- C – Staff memo 11/30/06
- D – Resolution No. 19, Series of 2007
- E – Charrette materials 3/22-23/07
- F – Notes from public meeting 8/15/07
- G – Advertisement/TV schedule for public meeting 11/15/07
- H – Advertisement/feedback results from 3/12/08
- I – Aspen Art Museum Partnerships