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December 10, 2023

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Parks, Recreation and Cemetery Commission  
City of Benicia  
250 East L Street  
Benicia, CA 94510  
Via email pcs@ci.benicia.ca.us

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Dear Commissioners:

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Re: October 2023 Draft Benicia Parks, Trails, and Open Space Master Plan

[Redacted]

On behalf of the [Redacted], we would like to offer the following comments on the October 2023 Draft Benicia Parks, Trails, and Open Space Master Plan (Master Plan). It is our understanding that the proposed 2023 Master Plan supersedes the 1997 plan.

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Benicia is fortunate to have two historic districts with such important historic resources. The Downtown Historic District is a nationally designated Main Street Downtown, the only one in Solano County, and the Arsenal Historic District is on the National Register of Historic Places. Therefore, our comments focus on the four parks within Benicia’s historic districts; City Park (#20), St Paul’s Square (#22), Waterfront Park (#15) and Clocktower Park (#28).

We found that the Master Plan has provided substantial documentation on demographics, trends, surveys, public input, mapping, fiscal analysis, priorities for park use, all very important information. However, the historic district components of the Master Plan contribute to the community in a way that the other spaces cannot. A one-size-fits-all approach for park improvements fails to maximize the benefits that the historic district parks provide. These parks serve residents and visitors, promote economic vitality, and enhance the identity and character of our city. In order to enhance these assets, the parks within our historic districts should be analyzed from the viewpoint of being destinations and gateways to our city. A goal of “Economic Connections” should be established with objectives to incorporate economic benefits into park design and improvements.

The online community survey question, “Potential benefits of City of Benicia parks, trails, and open space” received positive response for:

- Positively impacts economic/business development

- Attracts new residents and businesses
- Promotes tourism to the city and the region

Parks in the city's historic districts should be treated as mutually beneficial – parks can enhance historic districts and historic districts can enrich park experiences. These mutual benefits also have positive economic impacts on our businesses and tax revenue for the city.

This is an opportune time to enhance our parks as part of the public realm with public art, interpretive signage, wayfinding systems, and landscape design that interprets and gives context to the city's history. Benicia's historic park assets connect our town to a larger state and national context through the San Joaquin/Sacramento National Heritage area that was created by Congress in 2019.

The Draft Park Master Plan proposes future master plans for the City Park, St. Paul's Square, and Clocktower Park, but there is no indication of when those master plans would start. In order to maximize efficiency and reduce potential redundancies, the master plans for these parks should be completed prior to making improvements. After the master plans for each park is completed improvements and estimated costs could be made within the context of the specific park plan. Additionally, there is no explanation of the expenses listed for each park. Do these expenses include the cost for preparation of a master plan?

The following is a summary of expenses for each of the parks in the historic districts.

- CTP City Park \$1,584,500
- St. Paul's Square \$212,500
- Clocktower Park \$100,000
- WFP Waterfront Park / Point Benicia/ First Street Park \$3,025,000 (master plan completed)

Further discussion of master plans, park development and improvements in the historic districts should be done in collaboration with Main Street, the Chamber of Commerce, Business Improvement District, Museum of History Benicia, Historic Preservation Design Review Commission, and the Benicia Historical Society in order to provide purpose, context and direction for the proposed master plans.

#### City Park

While technically not in the Downtown Historic District, it is the entry point and a visitor's first impression of downtown. The goal should be a positive and lasting impression. Phase 1 of the proposed improvements includes a new playground. This appears to mean the removal of the Playground of Dreams. The Playground of Dreams is an attraction for visitors to Benicia, such as

visitors attending the peddler's fair, parades, swim meets, or escaping from the heat. It seems premature to adopt plans to eliminate the playground before creating the master plan for the City Park. The Playground of Dreams was a community member/city partnership that has been part of the City Park for decades. It seems appropriate to provide community out-reach to determine if a Friends Group or Foundation are viable options for funding to refurbish and maintain the Playground of Dreams. Phase 2 of the concept plans includes new walkways, which seem to meander through the park. Given the significance of the City Park we suggest adding focal points such as interpretive panels about the city history that would entice park visitors to visit the rest of First Street. A pathway can guide a visitor from one place to another but also from one time to another. It would be a shame to miss such a "teachable moment."

### St. Paul's Square

The landscape design should enhance historic St Paul's church. The Gothic Revival Style church should be revealed in all its glory. Care should be taken to keep the landscaping from overgrowing and detracting from the space. St. Paul's Square is the heart of the First Street sitescape and a beacon of the Historic Downtown District. The yew trees with their vertical nature detract from and obscure the façade and roof line (steeple) of St. Paul's. Tree removal for this site would open up the view and provide for public art or public performance. This space could Highlight public art while also providing guidance to other historic areas of interest in Benicia. (A compass in the hardscape could decoratively indicate other locations to visit in town.) This park often serves as a beginning or ending point for city activities. Designing a hardscape that facilitates its role as a meeting place would be helpful. Adding a photo magnet (like the statue of Neptune's daughter on the shoreline down the street) could make it a place that invites social media posts of visitors with the iconic art work. Also, the corner of First and I streets is the first stop sign on First street. A striking little public art park, highlighting St Paul's, could make a great visual impression as the driver observes the stop sign.

### Waterfront Park (aka First Street Green)

The Train Depot (Depot) is the highlight and a magnet for the end of First Street. Without context, the Depot seems arbitrarily out of place. With the installation of the restored caboos to be donated by the Historical Society and the addition of educational signage, the visitor can be transported back in time. We could tell visitors and residents alike: the next time you take a walk down to the end of First Street, stop and look around. See the ruins of docks, now only lines of piers. Look at how the spit lines up with where the rails would have been south of the Depot. Stand and imagine all the hustling workers, the heavy equipment and the bustling warehouses that were there long ago. The end of First Street is a time machine Portal. Come on down and take a trip. If we do not commemorate it and tell people about it, then our town's history is lost.

The 2014 Urban Waterfront Enhancement and Master Plan provides for several improvements that have the potential to highlight and illustrate the historic significance of the waterfront and rail history of Benicia. The 2014 Plan includes a “train walk boardwalk” that aligns with the historic railroad. Inclusion of the boardwalk would provide context and enhance the character of the train depot. Yet, it is not listed as an improvement. We support its inclusion in the Master Plan for this area.

#### Clocktower Park

Clocktower Park, a widely visited park with irreplaceable historic assets, has seen little or no benefit from the 1997 Master Plan. The proposed Master Plan shows no improvements until a Master Plan for the park is prepared, but does not provide any indication when that might occur. A mere \$100,000 is estimated for the park at this time. Is that sufficient to prepare a master plan or to implement any proposed improvements? With its historic buildings, landscape, and views, this park could be an economic asset for the city. Benicia is the gateway to the National Heritage area from the west. This would be an ideal site to locate a visitor center as it overlooks the Carquinez Strait and vista of the Delta.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the 2023 Draft Benicia Parks, Trails, and Open Space Master Plan.

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