



April 17, 2017

VIA EMAIL

Members of the WPA
Historic Landmark
Designation
Subcommittee

Councilwoman Shirley Gonzales
City Hall
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Dudley Brooks

Dear Councilwoman Gonzales,

Itza Carbajal

We write to formally express our concerns about the proposed permanent fence around Guadalupe Plaza, which we discussed during our bi-monthly meeting on February 28, 2017. To place our discussion in context, we briefly review the development of the Guadalupe Plaza.

Antonia Castañeda, Ph.D.

Rachel Delgado

As part of the 1980 Avenida Guadalupe Neighborhood Improvement Plan, Guadalupe Plaza was to “serve as the focus for community events held by businesses in the area and by the facilities serving the neighborhood [such] as the churches and community centers” (p.10). Guadalupe Plaza became a reality in 1984 under the authority of the Urban Renewal Agency of the City of San Antonio who, in 1985, deeded and conveyed the Plaza to the City. In 1986, the City entered into a Property Management Agreement with the Avenida Guadalupe Association (AGA), a non-profit agency, to manage Guadalupe Plaza. Most recently, in October of 2010, the City entered into an Office Lease and Funding Agreement with AGA that, while a novation of the Prior Leases, does not alter the City’s ownership of, nor its responsibility for, Guadalupe Plaza. With respect to the fence, it is our understanding that the AGA has approached the City about installing a permanent fence around Guadalupe Plaza. It is also our understanding that the temporary fence that was placed around the Plaza sometime around September was installed by AGA due to concerns about loitering, drug use, and crime in the Plaza and perceptions that the Plaza is not a safe space.

Sarah Zenaida Gould, Ph.D.

Donna Morales Guerra

Beatrice Moreno

Cathryn Merla-Watson, Ph.D.

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Graciela Sanchez

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Tómas Ybarra-Frausto, Ph.D.

We have our own concerns about the Plaza. In particular, we have noted that programming in the Plaza has significantly declined over the last few years so that it is often inactive for long stretches of time. We are also aware that rental fees to use the Plaza make it out of reach for many community members, and that the bathrooms are often dirty or inaccessible. We believe there is a connection between the lack of scheduled programming, high rental fees, dirty bathrooms, and supposed loitering, drug use, and crime in the Plaza. Most importantly, fencing the Plaza addresses none of these issues. It masks them.

The complete membership
of the WPA and its supporters
includes over 100 individuals.

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We have two major concerns with respect to the proposed fencing: 1) how drug addiction and criminal activity in Guadalupe Plaza are addressed, or rather, not addressed in this case, and 2) the closing off of precious public space.

When we heard about the proposed permanent fence as a solution to the “loitering, drug use, and crime” we had many questions, including: what defines loitering in a public space? Is there documentation of a recent increase in drug use and crime in the Plaza and if so, how has the City addressed the issue? What alternatives to a fence have been explored? Building a fence around the Plaza neither examines, attends to, nor resolves issues of drug use or crime. Rather, it simply pushes the problematic behavior to another location, while closing off public space.

We have heard that there is at least a public perception of a “spike” in drug use and crime in the Plaza. If that is truly the case, and precisely because the incidence of mental, physiologic, and other health issues are often proven to be related to drug and substance abuse problems, and/or to criminal behavior, addressing the issue from a health perspective offers possible solution. Drug addiction is a disease that requires treatment. A fence does not offer a solution to the individuals, or to communities, who live with this reality.

We are deeply saddened to think that whereas other communities may have the resources and commitment to combat the problems of crime and drug addiction with real solutions, including treatment centers, in the Westside our community is being offered a fence – something that will do nothing to confront crime and drug addiction. Furthermore, in this political climate, building fences to keep people of color out of a public space feels like a blanket condemnation of our community; it reifies and applies the specious national discourse to the local level – that we’re all “bad hombres.” Everyone needs access to public spaces, not just the privileged. Everyone needs access to addiction treatment, not just the privileged.

Richard Keith from the Department of Planning & Community Development recently met with members of the WPA about this matter and told us that AGA surveyed the Plaza’s neighbors about the permanent fence. However, MujerArtes, a women’s clay collective located adjacent to the Plaza at 1412 El Paso Street, who rent the building from the AGA, was not included in the survey. The women who work at MujerArtes five days a week know many of the people who regularly spend time in the Plaza and they report never feeling threatened or harassed. We are concerned with the formulation, methodology, and conduct of a survey that may not have accounted for bias, if even unintended bias.

Equally important, we warrant that most of the people being perceived as drug addicts and criminals in the Plaza who would be “fenced off,” are residents of the Westside. They are the children of the Westside. Fencing off the Plaza speaks volumes about how we as a city address, or rather, do not address, social, health, and other issues that arise. We criminalize the situation and the people; we push them out, get rid of them, and make them somebody else’s problem.

To address our second primary concern with fencing Guadalupe Plaza, we offer historical and cultural context. Plazas, as a feature of the built environment, have a special place in Texas history. By law, all Spanish settlements in the Americas started with a church and a plaza – the head and the heart of a community. Nearly every extant Spanish settlement in South Texas retains this feature. Guadalupe Plaza is unique in that it is a 20th century incarnation of the Spanish plaza. As Mexicans were increasingly pushed out of central San Antonio and the Westside grew by leaps and bounds with the arrival of refugees and exiles from the Mexican Revolution, the Mexican majority Westside had no

plaza of its own. Thus the 1980 Avenida Guadalupe Neighborhood Improvement Plan's proposal for the creation of Guadalupe Plaza was both culturally appropriate (it follows the traditional design in that it has a church on one side) and sensitive to the community's need for public space. To our knowledge, no plazas in Texas are enclosed by a fence. Indeed, throughout Mexico and Latin America plazas exist as open spaces. It is our belief that fencing off Guadalupe Plaza would betray the cultural heritage of the plaza as a community space.

We would like to see increased access to public spaces like Guadalupe Plaza. We suggest eliminating or drastically reducing rental fees for use of the Plaza. By activating the space, we believe many of the perceived problems in and around the Plaza will be greatly reduced. We believe that a fence will only further promote the idea that the Westside is not safe and add to the perception that poverty equates criminality.

Finally, the idea for a fence around Guadalupe Plaza is not a new one, nor an effective one. Some years ago there was a fence around the southern half of the Plaza along Guadalupe Street. The community disliked the limited access to the Plaza and complained so it was ultimately removed. Why would we repeat a past mistake by adding another fence around the Plaza?

We thank you for meeting and discussing this issue with us in February. Per that discussion, the WPA goes on record opposing the proposed fence around Guadalupe Plaza. Already there is a strong perception that residents are being pushed out of public spaces in San Antonio. Already there is a strong perception that poor people are being pushed out of their neighborhoods. We are neither oblivious, nor unconcerned about the issues of drug addiction and criminal activity perceived to be present in the Plaza, but fencing this public space does nothing to address or resolve the problem. It merely pushes it to another locale, most probably on the Westside.

Sincerely,

The Westside Preservation Alliance

CC: Cristina Ballí
Maria Berriozábal
Jennifer Falcon
Adriana Garcia
Lori Houston
Richard Keith
Celina Pena
Debbie Racca-Sittre
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