

REVIEW OF FALCONS PLANS FOR STADIUM - draft summary

Mike Dobbins 2/28/14

In an effort to gain clarity on why MLK, Jr. Drive can't maintain east-west continuity as it traverses the Falcons stadium site, the Falcons invited me to meet with their architects to review their plans in more detail than had been available before.

In addition to the proposed disjunction of MLK, the review included other concerns raised by neighborhood civic and faith groups and individuals related to the physical impacts of the stadium on the west side neighborhoods. Thus the review also included:

- Restoring east-west connectivity from Magnolia Street and the Vine City MARTA station across the present Georgia Dome site into Downtown
- Developing and maintaining active street and plaza building fronts that would house community-serving activities open and available to nearby neighbors on a year-round basis (not just during events)
- Creating park and plaza settings that would be available, maintained and managed as amenities for the general public, again on a year round basis
- Honoring and celebrating the history and the culture of the churches, the neighborhoods and the AUC to the west, whose connectivity was severed with the GWCC and Georgia Dome and the destruction of the Lightning neighborhood

On the issue of west-east MLK continuity, the plan review revealed information that had not been detailed in earlier, more diagrammatic reviews. While the issue of the 100 foot security setback remains an issue, the more compelling obstacle to achieving continuity is the plan to include a significant amount of space that is to front on the MLK side of the building, space that would house office and service activities for the Falcons. Those activities, which would operate on a daily basis, together with the accommodation of the grade changes that run along MLK, make swinging back across this space to maintain continuity infeasible. I should note here that since I am out of town I have only just received the multiple alternatives that were presented at yesterday's open meeting, and it appears that some of the ideas presented there show possibilities that, had they been available sooner to all those affected, and especially Central United Methodist Church, might have been able to achieve the connectivity goal.

Nonetheless, I've heard no one say that the current plan developed by Public Works improves east-west connectivity over what existed before the removal of the viaduct and the impending closure of the MLK-Mitchell Street connector. The MOU signed by the parties charged with implementing the stadium and mitigating its impacts apparently puts the onus of dealing with the MLK question squarely on the City. The plan the executive branch has come up with

undeniably cuts in half the pre-existing connectivity and introduces a confusing set of intersection moves to maintain some kind flow over this reduced capacity, a make-do plan at best. Public Works points out that their traffic projections show that their plan can accommodate the traffic. Their projections, however, are narrowly focused, not taking into account more comprehensive issues such as, among others:

- this is one of only two west-east streets that directly connect the city's western neighborhoods to downtown
- there is emerging a consensus vision that calls for making the street a grand boulevard, lined with more intense mixed use development to strengthen the economy, jobs, and community serving space along its length

It is doubtful that this interruption provides the necessary access infrastructure to fulfill connectivity needs or to support development visions.

Regardless of the vote on the abandonments, it is incumbent on the city to do better than the present plan, the shortcomings of which will become only more evident as the "temporary" detour cuts off the present MLK-Mitchell connector. Doing better means operational improvements perhaps, but should also mean working with the Central United Methodist and property owners to the west to explore ways for accommodating their needs, mitigating their degradation of service, and if possible for restoring the lost continuity and capacity. Since the MOU stipulates that whatever the City wants to do west of Northside Drive is on the City to design and implement, a couple of suggestions come to mind:

- Engage professionals with proven success in designing public spaces that actually work for people in providing activities and amenities that both function well and that attract people to them
- To pay for whatever such a process might produce, draw from the large reservoir of TAD funds that are already held at Invest Atlanta, reportedly some \$50 million above and beyond the \$15 million committed to Vine City and English Avenue infrastructure improvements

More briefly on the other issues covered in the review:

- On the west-east connectivity from the Magnolia Street to Vine City MARTA station area to Downtown:
 - The current plan can work for pedestrians if designed as a distinguished, well-lit, tree-lined promenade, with clear, accessible and inviting escalators and elevators providing for vertical connectivity
 - A bridge across Northside would be a big mistake in my opinion: such bridges only work when there is a high intensity of daily activities that they connect, usually with multi-story complexes on both sides; here a bridge would only be

used during major events and would fall derelict at most times – people don't like to go up to only go back down; better to work with GDOT to establish clear and attractive street crossing treatments, like paving and markings, pedestrian refuges, and signalization so that the street level activity favors pedestrians at this location; and the cost savings would be significant

- On the active and year round provision of community serving activities:
 - the plaza facing the MARTA station/Magnolia Street area will have a significant amount of retail and service frontages, accessible from the plaza as well as from the stadium year round to neighborhoods across Northside, not just during events
 - as mentioned above, the MLK facing frontages will house office and service spaces, again with front doors facing MLK
- On the provision and management of parks and plazas:
 - The plan calls for the space to be made available by the destruction of the Georgia Dome to be used as a programmed and managed park; only for the few events that require parking will it be used for that purpose
 - The plan calls for the park to be grassed, with the ability to be used for such events as soccer and other sports, farmers markets, food trucks, community fairs, and the like
 - The Falcons/Blank Foundation have pledged to actively outfit and manage the park for the above and other recreational and community-serving purposes
 - The Falcons are considering the use of water – fountains, runnels - as a way of making their plazas more inviting and in a way that highlights and celebrates its position as the headwaters of the Proctor Creek basin; more prosaically, they are committed to assuring that all storm water run-off will be detained and managed on site
- On honoring and celebrating the neighborhoods', the churches', and the AUC's special history and culture:
 - The Falcons/Blank Foundation intend to incorporate the area's civil rights, history, church, and HBCU heritage into their interpretive signage and into events as they come to be planned and carried out
 - Examples of how this provision might be met should include preservation of artifacts from the churches to be demolished, like stained glass windows that could be incorporated into the stadium fenestration, the steeple and basement form Friendship, honoring the history and contribution in a fitting demolition ceremony and the like

Note that all of above observations rely on information contained in the current plans for the stadium and the representations of intentions by the Falcons and Arthur Blank Foundation. These were offered, in my opinion, in good faith. In order to follow up and follow through on this program of intentions, it seems appropriate that they become provisions in the Community Benefits Plan/Agreement (CBP/A), whose processes for implementation are just now underway. Note too that this review did not touch on pledges of intentions related to other provisions now under discussion in the CBP/A with respect to job training, hiring, small business procurement, infrastructure improvements, and housing stabilization among other provisions.

The City, through the MOU and other actions, has already absolved the Falcons and taken on to itself responsibility for mitigating impacts of the stadium design on the neighborhoods to the west. The complications of the stadium design context, both constraints and opportunities, related to improving MLK continuity cannot be resolved in the near term and depend on City actions as outlined above. Accordingly, written confirmation from the Falcons, stipulating their intentions to address the above noted and other issues of concern to the community and further committing themselves to follow through on these intentions, should accompany consideration of the vote on the abandonments.

In addition, the Council may want to consider acting on an accompanying resolution that calls for good faith actions by the City, the Falcons, the GWCC, and Invest Atlanta to establish benchmarks, measures, targets, timelines, oversight structures, and reporting requirements to further bind all parties to the good intentions that all have expressed. This might be a way of broadening the availability of information, promoting transparency, and structuring accountability for all parties, for the purpose of reaching better decisions. Such a resolution might similarly apply to the Community Benefits Plan that the Council adopted in December, again a document long on good intentions but short on measurable standards and accountability. The problem is that good intentions have a way of slipping away in the face of financial and political considerations. The west side neighborhoods have experienced this slipping away for decades.

Present at the meeting were Rich McKay from the Falcons, Bill Johnson and George Heinlein from 360 Architects, Mark Carter from TVSA architects, Bill Darden, Matt Slade, Steve Labovitz, Penny McPhee and Frank Fernandez from the Blank Foundation, Emil Runge, Council Aide to Councilman Andre Dickens, Jeb Dobbins and Mike Dobbins.