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COMMUNITY COUNCIL



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COUNCIL



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Joint Statement - The Quaich Project and West Princes Street Gardens

Agreed by The Cockburn Association, New Town & Broughton Community Council, Old Town Community Council, West End Community Council and Tollcross Community Council
11 December 2019

Preamble

West Princes Street Gardens is a much-loved green space, located in the centre of Edinburgh, at the foot of the castle. For residents and visitors, it is an oasis of peace and tranquillity in the midst of the busy city. Well-wooded with a fine tree canopy and extensive flower beds, it is beautifully maintained by council gardeners. Three war memorials and a series of other monuments and statues testify to its importance in the history of the city.

Position Statement

The Cockburn Association and the four Community Councils support the improvement of specific park facilities — notably the replacement of the Ross Bandstand, removal of the concrete amphitheatre and better access for all — in keeping with the use of the gardens as a quiet space for enjoyment and relaxation, and in scale with the layout of the site. We do not support the transformation of the park into a commercial entertainment venue, involving access restriction and noise pollution disturbance.

In our view, the greenest buildings are the ones that are already built. Therefore, our support for a replacement is, predicated on the need to justify the proposed demolition of the existing Ross bandstand with a clear analysis of refurbishment/improvement options. From our understanding, this has been dismissed outright based on little more than anecdotal evidence and with no cost appraisal for a conservation-led approach to improving the facilities.

Our detailed position is as follows:

1. We welcome the provision of funding from Norman Springford for investment in WPSG and recognise that this has enabled the restoration of the Ross Fountain, and that this has enhanced the experience that the park offers.
2. We note that the public values West Princes Street Gardens primarily as a green space and as a tranquil environment. Repeated public attitude surveys over the past 20 years have confirmed this position.
3. We support the idea of an imaginative redesign of the area west of the Ross Fountain as “as a garden square”. We believe that a small performance area might work there as a focus for informal use by children. However, we would not support use of this area for large screen telecasting of sporting events, commercial events, etc. as such infrastructure and activity would be out of keeping with the qualities that define the park.

4. We support the proposal to improve the shelters and recognise the potential value of having some form of information there, and possible community input. However, we also feel that the local climate means that there remains a need for a covered resting area where people can sit without the need to pay, and that a toilet facility might also be appreciated at that end of the gardens. The Gardener's Cottage might be the best place to display information about the gardens, acting as a Welcome Centre during the development of the Quaich Project, since it is the base for RDT. This could continue after RDT no longer have a need for a physical presence.

5. We support the replacement of the Ross Bandstand but have concerns about the scale of the new facilities. We would support a design with a minimal intervention into the landscape after the removal of the existing concrete amphitheatre. The layout should be sensitive to the sense of space and special setting, along with views to and from the castle.

It is essential in our view that the Pavilion and any new amphitheatre are designed in terms of seating, acoustics and stage visibility for a capacity no greater than the existing arrangement, namely a seated audience of no more than 2,400 and a standing audience of under 3000. It should not be configured to facilitate larger events that extend into the wider gardens and are disruptive for garden visitors in terms of access, and for nearby residents and businesses in terms of noise pollution.

The resulting venue should be suitable for small arts and community events, both amplified and un-amplified. Care should be taken with the acoustics to produce a clear, bright sound within the amphitheatre, with minimum outside leakage. The amphitheatre should be an integral, minimally intrusive part of the garden, not separate from it and not hard paved. It should be architecturally coherent and include permanent seating that can also be used by garden visitors, that can be supplemented by temporary seating.

6. There is a necessary connection between the cost and scale of the Pavilion and amphitheatre, their use, and the anticipated flows of income. We recognise that RDT is the provider/deliverer of the Quaich Project and the City Council is preparing the business case, however these calculations (i.e. the Business Case) need to be in the public realm before any planning application is lodged. It has been suggested verbally that minor events must be paid for by major events in the same location. However it's never been explained why the garden needs income specifically derived from the garden itself, rather than from other council venues such as the Usher Hall.

7. We are opposed to the Welcome Centre development. We recognise the need to improve disabled access to, and within, the gardens, but we are not convinced that lift access via a Welcome Centre is the only means by which that might be achieved. Furthermore, the combination of the Welcome Centre with the Pavilion and auditorium means that the scale of the development proposed will be damaging to the character of the garden as a "green oasis". We believe that the Gardener's Cottage could be used as a basis for giving visitors information about the gardens. What is being proposed looks to be a very expensive intervention, which would be highly disruptive during construction. We are also concerned that servicing a large Welcome Centre will increase the frequency of delivery vehicles penetrating the gardens.

8. We are concerned that the more ambitious the proposals are, the greater will be the loss of trees. While we recognise that trees die and some maybe threatened by diseases, it is beyond dispute that the existing trees make a fundamental contribution to the character of the gardens, and that tree planting is desirable for carbon capture. We believe that it would be helpful to have City Council staff with expertise in parks and intimate knowledge of West Princes St Gardens attending the Stakeholders' Forum meetings.

9. We are opposed to any radical redesign of the landscape. We are concerned that the more serpentine paths favoured by the Quaich, by ignoring the valley form could actually create barriers for those with

mobility impairments (who will have to negotiate slopes) and visual impairments (for whom a straight line is easier than a walk of twists and turns).

10. We are concerned that currently there is no resolution advanced in relation to the issues posed during the Summer Sessions shows, when hoardings were erected along the northern edge of the gardens and the seats on Princes St were fenced off, reducing pavement width and causing pedestrians to spill into the road.

11. We are currently neutral in relation to the proposed bridge building projects, pending further information once site surveys have been completed.

12. We are concerned that significant geological and infrastructure issues such as the main east-west sewer running through the site and the current level of pumped drainage have yet to be fully explored. The implications of The Quaich Project on these could be considerable.

13. The scale of land engineering to facilitate the development is huge, and completely out of scale and character of the gardens. Whilst phasing might have some minor benefits, it would also mean extending the period of intrusive construction activities undermining the very qualities which the public most appreciates.

14. It is understood that the intention of the project is to make WPSG the City's Performance Hub. The recent statement by the City Council that it is unwilling to cap major events is concerning, as it signals a major shift in the use of the gardens. In view of the recent failure to control developments in the East Gardens, we expect very clear public commitments to be made regarding this. We do not believe that making a commercial, profit-driven performance hub is compatible with the gardens in itself or in the context of the conditions imposed on the use of them as a Common Good asset.

SUMMARY

Overall, we regret that design work has progressed so far without the benefit of being informed by a Heritage Statement. Quite simply, this is the wrong way round, and unnecessarily creates the risk that the Heritage Statement can be perceived as an obstacle to be negotiated, rather than an essential basis on which to build ideas.

We are aware that a major fundraising campaign is being launched with the aim of raising sufficient money to deliver the Quaich Project as conceived in the winning design in the 2017 competition. However, much good could be done with much less money, as was the case, for example, in the recent and widely acclaimed upgrading work at Saughton Park. A modest and incremental approach could enhance the gardens' qualities that are most appreciated – greenery and tranquillity. In contrast, if the ambition is for the Quaich Project to create a "world class" performance hub and associated corporate facilities, we face a significant period when the gardens will become a major building site closed to the public. Similarly, once operational a large concert-based solution will be a destination attracting significant traffic into the city centre. This will cause increased disturbance and noise to the 50,000 remaining residents in that part of the city, where traditional residential communities and small businesses are already being put under pressure by short-term letting and over-tourism.

Last, but not least, we would draw attention to the statement of Outstanding Universal Value on which the World Heritage status is based. In particular, "Integrity" as a property "encompasses significant town-planning components, including layout, buildings, open spaces and views, that demonstrate the distinctiveness between the organic growth of the Old Town and the planned terraces and squares of the New Town with the wide landscaped valley between". If that "wide landscaped valley" becomes cluttered and obscured by the scale and form of a large Pavilion, auditorium and Welcome Centre sitting amongst mounds and twirly paths, and hidden from Princes Street by hoardings for multiple days a year to block views of major gigs, then the damage will be irreversible and international in significance.

None of this need happen if an organic, heritage-based upgrading is delivered in the spirit of what Geddes called “conservative surgery”, and through the initiative and generosity that began with renewing the Ross Fountain.