

# City of Detroit

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**TO:** City Planning Commission

**FROM:** Christopher Gulock, AICP, Staff

**RE:** **Request of the Planning and Development Department to amend the Future General Land Use map of the Detroit Master Plan of Policies for the Indian Village area of Neighborhood Cluster 3 for the portion of Gabriel Richard Park containing the Brodhead Naval Armory (RECOMMEND APPROVAL OF PROPOSED MASTER PLAN AMENDMENT)**

**DATE:** March 3, 2021

## **RECOMMENDATION**

The City Planning Commission (CPC) staff, having completed its review and analysis, recommends approval of the proposed Master Plan amendment.

## **REQUEST**

The Planning and Development Department (P&DD) has submitted a request to amend the Future General Land Use Map of the Detroit Master Plan of Policies for the Indian Village area of Neighborhood Cluster 3 for the portion of Gabriel Richard Park containing the R. Thornton Brodhead Naval Armory (Brodhead Armory) from “PRC” Recreation to “INST” Institutional. The proposed Master Plan change is required for this City-owned property to be sold or leased. The P&DD request is attached for reference.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Brodhead Armory, located at 7650 East Jefferson Avenue, was built in 1929 and 1930 as a training center and barracks for Michigan’s military reserves. The footprint of the existing Armory covers about 87,000 square feet and the property contains about 4.7 acres. In 2003, the federal government decided to discontinue use of the building as an armory, and the City agreed to take ownership of the building. The City initially used the building as equipment storage by the Recreation Department. Unfortunately, over the years, the building has been damaged by burst pipes, vandals, and scrappers.

### ***Current Zoning & 2008 Master Plan Amendment***

In 2008, the City, after marketing the property, agreed to sell the vacant Armory to a developer who

proposed to renovate the building as an entertainment/sports training facility. In order to allow this redevelopment to move forward, the City needed to rezone the site and amend the Master Plan.

As a result, in June 2008, the City rezoned the Armory and adjacent land from a R6 (High Density Residential) zoning classification to a SD4 (Special Development District, Riverfront Mixed) zoning classification. Additionally, in July 2008, the City amended the Master Plan for the Brodhead property from MP (Major Park) to SRC (Special Residential-Commercial). Please see the attached excerpt from the July 2008 Journal of the City Council.

However, the proposed entertainment/sports training facility never materialized, and the building has remained vacant ever since. In 2009, when the City approved a comprehensive update of Detroit Master Plan of Policies, the Brodhead Armory site was designated as Recreation (PRC) with the rest of Gabriel Richard Park - the earlier amendment to SRC in 2008 was accidentally not included in the City-wide Master Plan update. In this regard the request before you represents a corrective measure for the 2009 error. The zoning of the site, however, remains SD4.

### ***Historic Designation***

The Brodhead Armory is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and, in October 2001, was designated a local historic district. It is one of a small number of Detroit's locally historically designated properties with an interior designation as well. The building houses several historic features including decorative tile work, stonework details, and nautically themed artwork done under the Works Progress Administration (WPA) established as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. The interior of the building houses the largest collection of federally-funded Depression-era artwork of any building in the state. The historical, architectural, and in particular, the artistic significance of this resource warrants thoughtful and sensitive treatment to ensure its preservation.

### **PUBLIC HEARING RESULTS**

The CPC held a public hearing on February 4, 2021 for the subject request. At the hearing, CPC and P&DD staff explained the Master Plan request. Additionally, in an effort to be transparent CPC staff and the Jobs and Economy Team in the Mayor's office and the DEGC explained the Administration's current plan to sell the Armory to the Detroit Parade Company. It was presented that the Parade Company is requesting to purchase the site from the City, to rehabilitate the north end of the Armory (the vestibule and drill hall), demolish the south end of the building, and to construct a new 2-story addition containing 130,000 square feet. The Parade Company is proposing to salvage the historic interior elements of the south end of the site, where feasible, and to relocate items to the rehabilitated building and new facility. The estimated total project cost is \$36.6 million, and if the development proposal is approved, the Parade Company will initiate a fundraising campaign. If the requisite funds are not secured, there will be know closing and the property will remain in the City's inventory.

At the hearing, CPC staff noted it had received a letter from the Brodhead Armory Preservation Society and the Detroit Art Deco Society opposing any demolition and supporting the entire building and its historic interiors be preserved. Eight persons associated with the Brodhead Association spoke in opposition to the City's proposal to sell the Armory to the Detroit Parade Company. The group indicated it had a plan to save the entire building, to restore all historic features where possible, to create a place for veteran groups, and to build an adjacent residential tower. Five other persons spoke with various comments, including concerns about parking and demolition of the rear of the Armory. Unfortunately, too much focus was placed on the potential redevelopment proposal and the not the proposed Master Plan amendment that is actually before the Commission.

The Commission raised several issues including:

- The sale price of the Armory?
- How can the City better protect properties that it owns?
- How are City properties marketed and how are selections made, including the Brodhead?
- The real estate climate in Detroit has changed significantly since the last Request for Proposals (RFP) for the Brodhead was issued in 2015.

## **PUBLIC HEARING FOLLOW-UP**

### ***Administration Marketing of the Brodhead***

During the CPC hearing, the Administration indicated the City had issued a RFP for the Armory site in 2003, 2010, and 2015. The Administration indicates it has been marketing the property for years, and it occasionally has received various inquiries, including from veterans groups. Unfortunately, none of these efforts resulted in a successful proposal. They were not found to be appropriate for the building, viable activities, or financeable. Crain's Detroit Business reported in 2015, when the City through the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation (DEGC) issued the last RFP, the City determined that none of the RFP responses at the time provided a viable redevelopment option. Crain's also reported the DEGC, at the time, declined to entertain proposals that required demolition of the existing armory.

In response to questions raised at the CPC hearing, the Mayor's Office submitted a memorandum to the CPC dated February 17, 2021 describing the Administration's general process for City or the DEGC led RFP/RFQ (Request for Qualifications) process.

Furthermore, P&DD submitted a memorandum dated February 17, 2021 to the CPC reiterating the need to amend the Master Plan to again facilitate the conveyance and reuse of the Brodhead Armory. P&DD also stated, with the approval, it would commit to bring back details of the final selected development project.

### ***Meetings with the Brodhead Association***

CPC staff was invited by the Administration to attend two meetings one held on February 9, 2021 and another on February 23, 2021 between the Mayor's office/DEGC and the Brodhead Association. The Brodhead Association has assembled a team of consultants proposing to redevelop the Brodhead Armory and to construct a residential tower south of the building. The Brodhead Association was allowed to present its proposal to the Administration. At the end of the February 9<sup>th</sup> meeting, the Administration agreed to give the Brodhead Association two weeks to submit its financial details for the project. On February 23<sup>rd</sup>, the Mayor's office/DEGC and the Brodhead Association reviewed the Brodhead Association's development proposal and financials for phase one rehabilitation of the Brodhead Armory. As of the writing of this report, CPC staff understands the DEGC is still reviewing the proposed project financing. However, the Administration has indicated before the CPC and in other meeting with the Brodhead Association:

- That the Administration has been negotiating with the Parade Company since January 2018, and it is not its practice to drop negotiations midstream to entertain new proposals, but has done so in this case in response to the veteran assertions as to the viability and readiness of their proposal: and
- That the efforts of Brodhead Association/veteran's groups are appreciated, but they have not followed through on development proposals in the past, and, as a result, the Administration did not think it actually had a viable plan,

The DEGC will conclude its review and provide the veterans with a written summary of its findings

## **MASTER PLAND ANALYSIS**

### ***Surrounding Master Plan, Zoning, and Land Uses***

As noted earlier, the subject site has a SD4 zoning designation and PRC Master Plan designation. The following lists the Master Plan, Zoning, and Land Uses surrounding the Armory.

- North:** Master Plan (High Density Residential);  
Zoning (PD, Planned Development);  
Land Use (apartments)
- East:** Master Plan (High Density Residential);  
Zoning (R6, High Density Residential);  
Land Use (apartments)
- South:** Master Plan (Recreation);  
Zoning (R6);  
Land Use (riverfront)
- West:** Master Plan (Recreation);  
Zoning (R6 & Parks & Recreation, PR);  
Land Use (parkland)

### ***Community Feedback***

In addition to the February 4<sup>th</sup> CPC hearing, the following summarizes community feedback on the proposed request.

In early October 2020, CPC staff sent letters, as required by State law, to adjacent cities informing them of the proposed Master Plan change and requesting comments. To date, CPC staff have not received any comments from adjacent cities.

On January 26, 2021, the City of Detroit Department of Neighborhoods District 5 hosted a virtual community meeting to present the proposed Master Plan amendment and sale of the Brodhead Armory. Members of the nearby Charlevoix Village Association asked questions about the project related to the overall total investment and parking. Several veterans from the Brodhead Association spoke in opposition to the land sale indicating the association had a better plan for the building.

On February 16, 2021, the Department of Neighborhoods District 5 held a second virtual community meeting. One resident from West Village supported the Parade Company as the best chance to save the building. Three area residents raised concerns including the need to work with veteran groups, the Parade proposal was not the best use along the River, and could parking be accommodated for buses, etc.

## **BRODHEAD ARMORY REDEVELOPMENT SUGGESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION**

The CPC at this time has not been presented with any documentation or specifically asked to review any proposed sale of the Broadhead Armory or any particular development proposal. CPC staff appreciates P&DD's commitment, if the Master Plan is amended, to bring back details of the final selected project to the CPC prior to seeking City Council approval of the land sale. However, it is within your Charter mandated authority to speak to such things if the Commission desires.

If the Commission desires to address the redevelopment of the Brodhead more particularly, apart from the proposed Master Plan amendment, CPC staff has the following suggestions for consideration:

- The Brodhead Armory has been vacant for a long time and each day continues to further deteriorate, therefore, time is of the essence to save the building and the art therein;
- Due to the historic nature of the building both interior and exterior, every effort should be made to preserve the entire building and its features;
- At the expense of the City, one of the City's partner agencies or the developer some assessment of the condition of the building and its features should be conducted by professionals with the necessary expertise to determine the feasibility of preservation/adaptive reuse of the building and restoration of the art;
- If not already obtained an appraisal of the property should be conducted;
- If current negotiations for sale of the property are not successful consider issuing a new RFP; and
- Whoever the ultimate developer is, some effort should be made to celebrate the military history of the facility and if possible work with the veteran groups and others as appropriate to that end;

If so an additional recommendation can be prepared in that regard.

## **MASTER PLAN CHANGE CONCLUSION**

The Armory building and surrounding land have been vacant and underutilized for a number of years. The current PRC designation is not appropriate, because the City does not plan to use the site for recreational purposes and desires to see building privately repurposed. Presently, the PRC designation prohibits the City from selling or leasing the building to a private party.

The Master Plan states that the Institutional designation applies to educational, religious, health, or public use such as a church, library, museum, public or private school, hospital, or government owned or operated building, structure, or land used for public purposes. The Master Plan for the subject area along East Jefferson includes a mix of Recreation, Commercial, High Density Residential, and Institutional (the former Riverview Hospital and Water Works Park.

The City amended the Master Plan in 2008 to allow the building to be sold and redeveloped. However, again, that amendment was accidentally overridden by the 2009 comprehensive update of the Master Plan. As a result, the proposed Master Plan change is appropriate.

Attachment

cc: Greg Moots, P&DD  
 Karen Gage, P&DD  
 Katie Trudeau, Acting Director, P&DD  
 Donald Rencher, Group Executive for Planning Housing and Development  
 Amanda Elias, JET  
 Catherine Frazier, DEGC  
 Lawrence Garcia, Corp. Counsel