

Objections to Use of Masonic Temple and Property for Regina Cultural Centre Project

The City of Regina Council this evening is being requested to endorse in principle the Cultural Centre Redevelopment Project based on a recommendation of the City's Executive Committee of June 8, 2011. There are several reasons to reject the proposed proposal in its current form at this principle stage in light of its implications for the future development of downtown Regina. The current proposal would see as a result of the Cultural Centre Redevelopment Project the redevelopment of the property on which currently stands the Masonic Temple of Regina that includes the offices of the Grand Lodge of Saskatchewan.

The Masonic Temple of Regina has a proud history in the Province of Saskatchewan and serves not only the Masonic Lodges of Regina and area but through the Grand Lodge offices also serves Freemasonry within the province of Saskatchewan. In addition, a number of concordant bodies also make use of the building including the Job's Daughters of Regina and the Order of the Eastern Star. The building also houses an extensive library along with records of lodges in the province dating from its early history. Architecturally, the building is a treasure of the province that is well maintained by the lodges who own it. The lodge building has elaborate meeting rooms architecturally detailed to convey the ethical and historic teachings of Free Masonry along with other ornamental and aesthetic details, included both in the facade of the building but also in its interior. The Masonic Temple is open to be viewed by the public with tours arrangeable through the Grand Lodge Offices. Its architectural and aesthetic features have also been found appealing to other organizations interested in this distinctive setting (such as film makers in the province).

The focus of the City Counsel's approval this evening is in principle. As such, the following concerns will be raised at this conceptual level. It is important to note that the concept of the library redeveloping itself on its own properties to include a cultural centre is not being objected to. Rather it is the redevelopment of the project beyond the footprint of the existing library in a way that would eliminate or substantially change the presence of the Masonic Temple and land in the downtown of Regina without its own consent that is being challenged.

Heritage Status of the Masonic Temple:

The Masonic Temple is a cultural asset of the City of Regina and the Province of Saskatchewan. This was acknowledged by the City of Regina with the Masonic Temple's formal inclusion in the City of Regina's downtown heritage district in the 1990's. In addition, the Lodge Building, while not having provincial heritage status meets several important criteria for being considered culturally and historically significant. These include:

- Its association with important people or events in the community's history. Many of Regina's leaders, including political, economic, and social leaders, have been Freemasons who have played important leadership roles in the community and the province at large.
- Its importance as a historic community gathering place. The Masonic Temple has served as an ongoing significant meeting space since its inception.
- Its importance for cultural and spiritual reasons. While not a religion, Freemasonry espouses important ethical teachings and principles including important ideas of friendship and charity that are promoted within the Masonic Temple and the broader community.
- Its importance for architectural and aesthetic reasons. Features of the Masonic Temple have been identified by the City of Regina's designation of the building as an important heritage building within the area of Victoria Park.

In addition, the Masonic Temple meets important heritage and other cultural features identified by members of the public in the consultations held by the Regina Public Library under its current proposal. While these could presumably be made available to City Council for their review, they would certainly include:

- The architectural fit of the Masonic Temple with other neighbouring architecturally significant buildings surrounding Victoria Park (including Knox Metropolitan Church, First Baptist Church, the Land Titles Building, and the Hotel Saskatchewan). These historic buildings are irreplaceable and play an important role for both cultural preservation of the downtown core but also tourism and other opportunities for those outside the city. In the same way that the city of Moose Jaw has become a tourist destination due to its historic buildings, Regina's Victoria Park area also has similar features. This is unlike other cities who have chosen to demolish historically significant buildings in favour of modern glass and metal skyscrapers. Many of these cities now regret having done so.
- The Masonic Temple is also at an appropriate building height for buildings surrounding the park. Members of the public in the library's consultations appreciated having building heights that sloped down towards the park rather than surrounding the park with taller buildings.

Masonic Parking Lot

The current proposal would also seem to make use of the land currently held by the Masonic Temple as its parking lot. This is problematic as the proximity of the lot to the Lodge building is important for participation of its membership, many of which are senior citizens with difficulty walking. In addition, the parking lot provides a vital source of revenue for the upkeep of the Masonic Temple. The loss of this source of revenue would undermine the efforts of the city's lodges to maintain its historic building, currently at no cost to the City.

Issue of Property Rights

The Library Board when it reviewed its design objectives began by setting out constraints or limitations on proposed projects. We feel that the Library Board erred in not stipulating a basic precondition for its development planning, namely a respect for neighbouring properties, especially historically significant properties, in particular the property rights of the owners of these historic buildings. Ordinarily a board would place limitations on project development that would include ethical and legal limitations of this type (that is, both the ethical and legal property rights of others). The Library Board should have sought the consent of the Masonic Temple Company prior to engaging its staff, consultants, and the broader public on the library's future development in ways that envisioned its use of someone else's property. In not having done so, the Masonic Temple property and building became part of what was considered open to review. As such, the current proposal now on the table would seemingly involve expropriation of the property rights of the Masonic Lodges of Regina in the interests of the Public Library and its other partners. The expropriation of this land, however, is highly problematic in this case as the proposed proposed partners include not only public organizations but also private interests. Similarly, the mixed use development includes not only public amenities but also offices, retail establishments, restaurants, and a hotel presumably run by private organizations. The idea that the City would expropriate private property from a voluntary organization in order to benefit specific private interests seeking to develop, manage, and/or own the offices, retails establishments, hotel, and restaurants envisioned sets a very problematic precedent, both from a legal but also ethical perspective. The City is here to defend and advance the general citizen interest, not to use its powers of expropriation in favour of some private interests over and against the property rights of other private citizens, businesses, or voluntary organizations.

In conclusion, through the Regina Public Library's consultations the citizens of Regina were clear in seeking to advance the cultural dimensions of the city of Regina in advancing its long term sustainability. The Masonic Temple as a historically significant building is a key part of this culture. It is ill advised to seek to advance the cultural dimensions of the city through the proposed library project by eliminating existing culturally and historically significant buildings that are irreplaceable. We would like to recommend that City Counsel either reject the proposed "approval in principle" until such a time that a revised version clearly respects the buildings and property of the existing Masonic Temple or, alternatively, approves the proposal with specific caveats that exclude the Masonic Temple and properties associated with it from the redevelopment being proposed by the Regina Public Library. Thank you for your time this evening.