

Subject: [Fwd: DBH Mansion/Tankhouse/Mishka's Cafe DEIR comments]
Date: Sat, 28 Jul 2007 18:43:28 -0700
From: Tim Allis <teallis@ucdavis.edu>

----- Original Message -----

July 26, 2007

Ken Hiatt -

My comments on the Draft EIR are largely driven by the belief that the properties under consideration, the Dresbach-Hunt-Boyer Mansion with its associated Tankhouse, orange grove, cistern and park-like surroundings, and the Varsity Theater, are unique and unusual in the downtown and in the city as a whole, and should be thoroughly valued as such in the EIR analysis of any potential change that might affect them. They are unique from other structures in the downtown in their local and regional historical legacy and their ability to convey that history to current and future generations. They are unique in that they have been thankfully largely undamaged by the passage of time and redevelopment efforts over that time. They are unique in that they are publicly owned, and therefore should be in a much better position than privately owned properties to be used to their best advantage, creatively, for the greatest public benefit into the future, without an overriding demand that they necessarily generate a financial income for their owner. Instead, they can be valued in a category with public parks and civic spaces, valuable as gathering and recreational spaces, event spaces, tourist destinations, and unique civic assets that Davis can take pride in, without necessarily generating a definable revenue stream, though certainly enhancing the value and attractiveness of the surrounding area. Other cities would jump to regain what we have fortunately secured to this time.

With that overall perspective, my comments on the Draft EIR are the following:

There are various references in the DEIR to the potential economic benefits provided by the different alternative projects to either the Varsity Theater operation in particular, or to the city of Davis in general. An example is p. 4.0-3 "...an alternative site within the Core...would not provide immediate commercial support for the ongoing operation of the Varsity Theater." My understanding is that in general the purpose of an EIR is to evaluate environmental impacts apart from any economic discussion - why are economics considerations discussed at all ?

If economic considerations are to be included, it would seem that a detailed economic analysis of the various alternatives would be required to justify drawing any conclusions, including real projections of possible benefits to the Varsity or the City under either lease or sale options, as well as consideration of the desired threshold for economic "success" of the different alternatives, including some attempt to assess the comparative value to tourism or the public good of maintaining and enhancing the public space surrounding the DBH Mansion, including the Tankhouse plaza with orange grove. If Davis has not conducted a study of which civic elements attract tourism, and what the longterm economic benefits of maintaining historical resources and public open spaces are for a city, perhaps the State Historic Preservation Office or cities of Woodland or Sacramento might have such figures. In addition, the various alternatives will likely have an economic impact on the Mansion Square businesses, by either increasing visibility and accessibility with the smaller projects, or by blocking visibility and access with the larger projects and relocated Tankhouse. It seems any economic conjectures should be arrived at through analysis rather than speculation.

In addition, the original justification for a proposal in this location was to provide economic support for the operation of the Varsity

Theater, and that is repeated in the DEIR as cited above. Yet there is no statement detailing what sort of support the Varsity is requiring, if it requires any at this point. If the Varsity requires little or no economic support at this time, then a smaller, environmentally insignificant project, such as a rehabilitated Tankhouse in place, along with the attendant revitalization of an open public plaza with benches would be sufficient, and would be the "Environmentally Superior Alternative" as stated on p.2.0-2. If no economic support is required by the Varsity, that should not be included as justification for a project, or for evaluation of the alternatives.

I also disagree with the dismissal of the value of the DBH Mansion grounds and Tankhouse plaza and orchard as public open space, as outlined on p.2.0-4. The plaza has been used as a public space since it was created in 1979 until it was closed off in the late 90's in much the same way that the E Street or G Street plazas are used - for City-sponsored events, and by the casual public otherwise. Many Davis residents remember fondly live music, movies on the Varsity wall, and sitting in Santa's lap from that time period, and in fact the plaza is used to this day for holiday celebrations and support for civic events like the bicycle or running events, or even the recent Harry Potter book release event. The orange tree shaded plaza would be a wonderful civic space for tourists and residents to socialize or spend a quiet moment or eat lunch off the street if provided with benches, while the rest of the Mansion grounds are already inviting with benches on the west and south sides. As downtown Davis densifies, open civic space like this will become increasingly rare and invaluable, and impractical to recreate if lost, as is possible with the G Street plaza. If the proposed project or the other restaurant / office alternatives go forward, this unique civic and historic amenity will be lost forever, and the remaining Mansion grounds will be compromised. In line with this, I feel the Landuse map on p.5.1-12 is inaccurate and misleading - tiny green spaces without amenities adjoining the Pence Gallery and Bistro33 Restaurant are carefully marked as "Parks and Plazas", while the DBH Mansion, surrounding grounds and Tankhouse plaza are indicated to be "Retail Stores". I realize that this map comes from another source, but I feel strongly that just because this consideration was not given in other documentation, the reality of how the Mansion property has been actually used merits consideration in the current EIR.

Thank you for consideration of these issues,

Tim Allis
404 K Street
Davis, CA