

Subject: Stadium Bridges project

Date: Sun, 16 Dec 2012 09:35:02 -0500

From: John Kotarski <kotarski@pobox.com>

To:

Good morning Commissioners,

I attended the December 11th inaugural meeting of the Ann Arbor City Council committee which was setup to review the public art program. Marsha also attended. I left the meeting extremely encouraged that there was not one individual there wanting to end the program. All were committed to improving the program in whatever way they could. They also expressed the sentiment that a majority of their constituents wanted taxpayer supported public art and it was their duty to think outside the box to make that happen. I was invited to offer my opinion to the group on January 7th. Marsha expressed her feeling that my comments should not be taken as representing the Art Commission, which I did not think was the intent of the invitation, but I totally agree that Marsha should represent the Art Commission.

Consequently, I have been thinking of suggestions I might offer the committee. To that end, I would like to share an observation about our art selection process. I attended the task force meeting for Stadium Bridges on February 14th and left concerned that we are not adequately supporting the citizen volunteers we invite to spend time shepherding projects through to a recommendation stage. I think we should consider improving our approach.

By way of background, the task force for Stadium Bridges has spent several months writing an SOQ to which 36 artists applied. The meeting agenda for the 14th set aside two hours to winnow the list of artists from 36 submissions to 4 finalists. I do not believe there was adequate preparation in the way of organizing and summarizing the proposals so that the task force could work efficiently in applying a defined criteria and come to a collective recommendation.

This should not rest completely on Aaron's shoulders. It is up to us to recognize the limitation of volunteers and staff. Citizen volunteers cannot review over 300+ pages of proposals and examine 150+ images in the few days we allotted. More to the point, it is incumbent on the reviewer when reviewing these proposals that they understand the professional arc of each artist (emerging, mid-career, seasoned), the career highlights of each artist, and the conceptual approach that each artist proposes. This cannot be done merely by looking at slides. It requires a careful examination of each proposal and doing follow-up research. With the resources Aaron has available, I do not think he can adequately do this job alone. This is \$350K of taxpayer money and a professional approach is essential.

The group of citizen volunteers assembled are smart, enthusiastic, and committed to providing for our city a well thought out evaluation of these public art proposals. But, I do not think we have done everything we can to scaffold their efforts so that they can be successful. I spoke with two of them after the meeting and they were frustrated in not having a clear understanding of what to do and not enough time to do it. These task force members would welcome professional help. In fact, they thought a professional curator would be a smart way to develop the SOQ and select the finalists. Spending \$5K on a consultant to get three stellar finalists seems to me money well spent.

It may be difficult to start from scratch on this project but we need to rethink how we can use professional curators to scaffold our citizen volunteers moving forward on other projects. On this project, I think we should recommend hiring a consultant to sort through these proposals and arrive at 5 finalists from which the task force can select three that we will recommend offering an RFP/stipend to. I also think we need to refine details of the public forum listening tours and presentation tours that have been proposed earlier. These forums are part of the art ordinance amendment proposed by Council Member Briere and we should consider them for the Stadium Bridges project. Making these careful steps forward seems the prudent thing to do while the program is under intense scrutiny by City Council.

Additionally, Aaron may feel threatened by this proposal but I think he should be aware that we believe he is working as hard as he can. In spite of his hard work, he may need more direction and supervision from his supervisor or advice from a paid professional. I would welcome an open and frank discussion of these issue before our next meeting.

Best,
John