Bernard P. Friel: Citizens opposed to Mendota Heights' City Campus project want their voices heard

Bernard P. Friel

My wife and I have lived in Mendota Heights for over 69 years. Our children attended the public schools in the city, and I served on the board of our Independent School District 197. I also served on the Mendota Heights Planning Commission for 12 years, and on its Airport Relations Commission (then identified as the Metropolitan Airports Sound Abatement Council) for 5 years. My wife worked with the Parks Commission in early decisions on the location of the city trails and parks and with the school district in providing classes and facilities for disabled children. Thus, we have a long-term investment and participation in our community which we affectionally describe as "Spacious and Gracious".

At Mendota Heights City Council meetings in July, August, and September, council chambers filled with citizens who were present to object to the $33.1 million City Campus project. On July 7 the council was presented with a petition signed by 368 Mendota Heights residents opposing the project and nearly two dozen stepped to the podium to speak against it, some with emotion. Only the mayor's two sisters and the husband of one spoke in favor of the project.

All of those who spoke against the project did agree that the police facilities of the city need to be improved, expanded and brought up to date.

At the Aug. 5 meeting of the council, an overflow crowd was ready to express their views about the project and to do so had waited through a three-hour meeting for it was the last item on the council agenda. As former mayor Sandra Krebsbach approached the podium to speak on the project, Mayor Stephanie Levine refused to let her do so and refused to let anyone else speak on the project asserting that none had asked permission to speak before the meeting began. The mayor's action was a surprise to all for at two prior meetings residents were permitted, without prior permission, to address the City Campus project when it was reached on the agenda. Should anyone have any doubt as to the accuracy of these events please check the city media site for video confirmation.

It should be kept in mind too that three of the Mendota Heights former mayors have spoken against this proposed $33.1 million City Campus project all of whom are completely familiar with our existing city hall.

In mid-July I received an email invitation from Police Chief Kelly McCarthy to join her to discuss "the best path forward for the municipal campus project." I accepted her invitation and met with her in the City Hall police department in late in July. We had an amicable discussion in which I agreed we needed to upgrade the space for the police department and disagreed with her regarding a new City Hall. What was noteworthy about that meeting was that the chief made no mention of problems in the police premises except space. There was no mention of "mold and water and frogs and snakes" as described by Mayor Levine in the article, "New city hall looms over Mendota Heights Election" (Pioneer Press, Oct. 13). So, I was surprised in reading the story that Mayor Levine described those conditions as being present in the building just a few weeks after my meeting with the chief. And we were told those problems were so bad they required several immediate relocations in the police department. Nevertheless, remediation and repair of the police squad room had already been completed by Oct. 19.

Those city residents seeking an Environmental Assessment Worksheet for the project site were criticized for doing so claiming it was done just to delay the project. But all that is being asked is that the city meet the same requirements for the site that it requires for other projects in the city.

It is estimated that the average residence in the city would experience a $400 to $500 annual increase in real estate taxes for 20 to 25 years to pay for the proposed City Campus project. Many of us believe that approving such a tax increase is being completely insensitive to the combined financial impacts on city residents of the tax increases

coming from Dakota County, from the school district, from a spate of street and utility assessments, and from tariffs, inflation and the war in Iran.

And it should be noted It is such tax increases that contribute to making affordable housing un-affordable.

A Mendota Heights citizens group identified as Mendota Heights Residents for Responsible Planning was organized in July. It is an independent, resident-led community group committed to thoughtful planning, responsible spending, and meaningful public participation.

It came together during the City Campus project discussion because residents wanted a clearer understanding of the options, costs, and decisions being made — and a meaningful opportunity to participate before those decisions became final.

This Citizen group stands for:

No to an $33 million-plus City Campus: They oppose the proposed new City Campus and the substantial long-term property-tax burden it would place on residents.

Yes to preserving Mertensotto Field: They oppose any City Hall project that eliminates Mertensotto Field for it is the only field available to a residential district isolated by state and county highways.

Meet the Police Department's needs: They support addressing documented police safety, security and functional needs through renovation and expansion of the existing building or another responsible alternative.

Control city spending: From 2020-2025, the City General Fund budget increased nearly 38% and the property-tax levy more than 35%. Major spending decisions should be carefully prioritized and evaluated for their long-term impact on taxpayers.

Competitive bidding for major projects: They support competitive bidding for the design and construction of major city projects — even when competitive bidding is not legally required.

Protect the character of Mendota Heights: They support maintaining our Comprehensive Plan and zoning to preserve the established character of our community.

Mendota Heights Residents for Responsible Planning is an independent, resident-led community group committed to thoughtful planning, responsible spending, and meaningful public participation. Its website is ourmendotaheights.org.

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Bernard P. Friel is a member of Mendota Heights Residents for Responsible Planning; he did not write this article for or on behalf of that group.