

BOSTON PRESERVATION ALLIANCE

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Executive Director

Gregory J. Galer, Ph.D.

August 27, 2019

Lynne Kortenhaus
Boston Art Commission
Boston City Hall
Boston, MA 02201
Re: King Memorial

Dear Ms. Kortenhaus,

The Boston Preservation Alliance is Boston's primary, non-profit advocacy organization that protects and promotes the use of historic buildings and landscapes in all of the city's neighborhoods. With 40 Organizational Members, 125 Corporate Members, and a reach of 35,000 friends and supporters we represent a diverse constituency advocating for the thoughtful evolution of the city and celebration of its unique character. Among our Board of Directors are professionals from a range of backgrounds, and we should note that three of our twenty-one Board members are also engaged with this project as Directors/Council Members of Friends of the Public Garden. We appreciate the opportunity to offer comments on projects that impact the historic character of the city. Over the last several weeks we have communicated with our partners, solicited various perspectives, and engaged in a robust internal dialogue about this proposal in order to contribute thoughtful comments to the larger conversation. We look forward to continuing this dialogue as the project progresses.

On the 12th of June we attended the Art Commission's advisory hearing regarding the proposed King Monument, "The Embrace." We join many in the community and the voices of the Commission in the enthusiasm for a discussion about how Dr. Martin Luther and Coretta Scott King, and more broadly the Civil Rights movement, are honored in Boston. Such recognition is long overdue and we applaud Mayor Walsh and others for committing to remedy this omission. However we are concerned that at the meeting and leading up to it there was insufficient recognition of the process of working within a Boston Landmark and how that should be considered in process and design.

What it means to be a Boston Landmark

The presentation was helpful in understanding the proposal and its rationale, but it is important that the members of the Art Commission are fully aware of different perspectives and concerns regarding the site of the proposed monument that were not communicated at that meeting. We believe the enthusiasm for the proposal may be overshadowing the need for a robust and serious analysis of the impacts of any large addition to one of the most historic park locations in the country. It needs to be made clear that the Boston Common is a formal Boston Landmark, established as such in 1977, just two years after the Boston Landmarks Commission (BLC) was created and among the very first Landmarks it voted upon. That early recognition highlights both the historic significance and desire to preserve the nation's oldest public park, established in 1634, from losing its character-defining features as a park (rather than a sculpture garden or memorial) over time.

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While we believe the project team making an initial advisory presentation to the Boston Landmarks Commission on June 25 was a good first step, we encourage the two commissions to dialogue about the advantages and challenges of this proposal in a joint public meeting.

Location

To explain the memorial's placement on the Common, the presentation traced the proposed siting of the King monument to the location of the historic Great Elm and connected the amphitheater aspect of the proposal to former seating at the Parkman Grandstand. While informative, we are not certain that this narrative sufficiently justifies the transformation of what has been green space for decades into a large hardscaped area, nor the significant reshaping of topography of the Common. At the BLC meeting there were significant, and we believe valid, concerns about the walls and other landform changes in the proposal. We ask the Art Commission to work with the proponent, under the guidance of BLC, to adjust the scope, scale, and location of the proposal to mitigate conflicts with the Landmark guidelines. The same consultation process should occur with the Parks Commission which has extensive experience working within the historic Common.

If the Bandstand location does move forward, we encourage a more explicit reference to the march from Roxbury and King's speech be integrated into the overall design. The current proposal does not effectively communicate the reason for siting this particular memorial in this specific location. This memorial is an opportunity to connect people not just emotionally and artistically to the Kings, but to inform visitors of the historic events that occurred here in Boston and their role in the larger Civil Rights movement. We urge the design team, in collaboration with the Art Commission, to take full advantage of that opportunity.

Process and Precedent

The Alliance is frequently concerned about two significant implications when evaluating proposals: process and precedent. We would like to briefly touch on both as they relate to King Boston.

Regarding process, the Art Commission praised the King Boston team for a robust, open process but we are compelled to differ with that view, particularly as it relates to the siting of the proposal on the Common. We can honestly state that the Alliance, and to the best of our knowledge the Landmarks Commission as well, were unaware that a King memorial was proposed to be located on the Boston Common until it appeared in the Boston Globe in September of last year. By the time word reached most of us involved with Boston historic sites, the location of the monument was being described as a decision already made. That is an unfortunate way to begin a discussion with the body responsible for approving alterations to the Common.

And, despite our letter on October 15 encouraging a prompt advisory meeting with the Boston Landmarks Commission as well as conversations with King Boston and leadership at the Art Commission urging the same, the project was pushed forward for another eight months without an advisory hearing with the Landmarks Commission until late June of this year. We find that a missed opportunity to hear constructive feedback and build support from a critical community as partners toward a shared goal. Yet we are encouraged by the dialog which began at the June 25th BLC meeting in which the project team noted they were early in the design process and open to adjustments. Such willingness to entertain

constructive feedback from partners is essential to a successful outcome.

Regarding precedent, we are concerned that future projects of this scale may be detrimental to the historic qualities of the Common. BLC will undoubtedly be presented with similar projects in years to come if this memorial is approved. We can anticipate that others will make similar arguments about unique situations, "one-time" exceptions, and particularly worthy events or individuals. If future exceptions were also to be granted, the Common would lose its historic character and identity as a park landscape. We know that several requests are made each year to erect new monuments on the Common and they are unconditionally rejected, largely due to the understanding that there is a moratorium on new memorials on the Common. Those involved in the approval process for this type of proposal must be able to justify why this particular project should be approved while all others have been, and will continue to be, denied.

Additional points-

1) In our letter last year we noted with enthusiasm the fact that the King Memorial was being considered just as the Master Planning Process for the Boston Common was getting underway. We urged the full synchronization of the two efforts. We fear that preparations for the King Memorial have gotten ahead of the larger master planning effort, and the memorial itself as well as the Common will fail to benefit from a comprehensive plan. Decisions should be made within the complete context of the Common's future and should wait for that process to advance.

2) True understanding of the proposal is not possible from the images and model provided. A full scale mockup of the sculpture and landscape walls should be required to be placed on site, at the proposed grade. It is the only true way to analyze the impacts of location, sight lines, etc. to assure success. We urge the Commission to require such a mock up.

For these reasons we urge the Art Commission to refrain from approving this proposal until the Landmarks Commission process is complete. Without compliance with the Landmark process it is difficult for us to support this proposal. Additionally we request a clear public presentation of how the monument proposal fits within the Common Master plan. We look forward to further dialogue as the project is considered by other regulatory and advisory bodies in the city.

Thank you,



Greg Galer
Executive Director

CC:

Martin J. Walsh, Mayor of Boston
Chris Cook, Environment, Energy, and Open Space
Ryan Woods, Boston Parks and Recreation Department
Rosanne Foley, Boston Landmarks Commission
Lynn Smiledge, Boston Landmarks Commission
Brona Simon, Massachusetts Historical Commission
Liza Meyer, Boston Parks and Recreation Department
Nathan Frazee, Boston Parks and Recreation Department
Kara Elliott-Ortega, Boston Art Commission
Karen Goodfellow, Boston Art Commission
Liz Vizza, Friends of the Public Garden
Marie St. Fleur, King Boston
Michael Murphy, Mass Design Group