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Executive Director

Gregory J. Galer, Ph.D.

August 27, 2019

Lynn Smiledge
Boston Landmark Commission
Boston City Hall
Boston, MA 02201
Re: King Memorial

Dear Ms. Smiledge,

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 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 25th of June we attended your advisory hearing regarding the proposed King Monument, "The Embrace." We join many in the community and on 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 about several aspects of this specific project as proposed in the Landmark Boston Common.

As advocates for Boston's historic resources, the Alliance often collaborates with the Landmarks Commission, providing feedback as you weigh proposals with the standards and criteria of local Landmarks according to your mandate. While there are often compelling reasons to exercise flexibility in the regulations, it is ultimately the Commission's responsibility to preserve the historic integrity of the resources in your charge. The proposed King monument is a significant departure in size, scale, and materiality from the expectations set forth in the standards and guidelines, and varies significantly from any other changes that have been made to the Common since it was Landmarked four decades ago. Though the message of the memorial is one to be embraced by all Bostonians, we sense the Commissioners are torn between supporting that message and ensuring that the implementation of the memorial does not disrupt the explicit goals of the Landmark protections of the Common. We feel that the current proposal does not yet meet the standard as required for approval by the Landmarks Commission and encourage the proponent to continue to dialogue with the Landmarks, Parks, and Art commissions, as well as other stakeholders, to ensure

a collaborative process and successful project. We were pleased that the project was presented to you as “early in the process” and amenable to change.

To explain the memorial’s placement on the Common, the proponent traces the siting of the King monument to the location of the historic Great Elm and connects the amphitheater aspect of the proposal to former seating at the Parkman Bandstand. 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. These are substantial changes to a Landmark. We agree with the concerns raised by Commissioners about grade changes at this location and the new walls and tree pits this change would require. Any additions to the park land should be more fitting of the pastoral qualities of the Common emphasized in the Landmarking documentation.

Though we ask for modifications that minimize impacts to the site, we do encourage a more explicit reference to the Kings’ presence on the Common be integrated into the overall design. As suggested at the meeting, justification for siting a King memorial at this specific location is based upon the historic march from Roxbury and King’s speech at the Bandstand. This connection needs to be made overtly at the memorial, as do any other references such as quilt patterns in the hardscape. This is a chance to connect visitors emotionally and artistically to the Kings, but also to educate about the historic events that occurred here in Boston and their role in the larger Civil Rights movement. We strongly urge the proponent to further explore educational opportunities at the site. Without interpretation, the memorial as proposed is more about bold public art and less about a memorial to the Kings, their work, and their relationship with Boston and the Common. We feel this would be a missed opportunity to make important statements that have been left unsaid in Boston’s built environment for far too long.

Another concern with this project regards precedent for additional development on the Common. If Commissioners approve a project like this today, future Commissioners will be asked to make similar exceptions down the road. We can anticipate that other special interest groups will make similar arguments about unique situations, “one-time” exceptions, and particularly worthy events or individuals. If future exceptions of this scale 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. If this proposal is approved, it should be under the condition of a formal policy that prohibits any future development on the Common for a specified amount of time.

Therefore, with the understanding that this memorial is a one-time exception, we ask the Commission to consider if this proposal is the most appropriate project for that singular exception. Perhaps it is, but we do not believe the discussion has yet been framed in this potentially illuminating way. It seems that the current master planning process for the Common would be the best framework to determine that a new element is acceptable in the park and what it should be. We feel that it is in the best interest of the Common and the city for no project to be approved for the Landmark until the master planning process is complete and guides that decision. We urged better integration of this proposal and the Master Plan back in October 2018, and we are disappointed the opportunity for this holistic examination has not been more valued, though the opportunity remains. We suggest the creation of a collaborative working group consisting of representatives from all relative City departments, commissions, and agencies as well as local advocacy groups to share perspectives, concerns, and ideas for this specific proposal.

We agree with many of the concerns raised by Commissioners at the advisory hearing and anticipate that the design team will address these issues before returning to the Commission. True understanding and analysis of the proposal, however, is impossible from the images and model provided. A full-scale mockup placed on site at the proposed grade should be required of the proponent. It is the only way to assess the positive and potentially negative impacts of location, sight lines, etc. We urge the Commission to require such a mock up.

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
Brona Simon, Massachusetts Historical Commission
Liza Meyer, Boston Parks and Recreation Department
Nathan Frazee, Boston Parks and Recreation Department
Lynne Kortenhaus, Boston Art Commission
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