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To: The Franklin City Council

RE: Parking Plan, a Second Look

If the current conceptual plan for reconfiguring parking in downtown Franklin and its historic neighborhoods is implemented, people will have a hard time finding parking places and reaching their favorite restaurants and businesses. The current conceptual plan suggests that parking spaces in the downtown core would be increased by roughly 10%. Much of this increase in parking comes from additional perimeter parking on Wayne and Jackson and the removal of the old bank structure on Main and Madison. When you take a closer look at the conceptual plan's larger impact, there is a potential to lose 39 total parking spots currently being used by residents and businesses along Monroe Avenue that were not calculated or shown as a loss in the initial analysis. The conceptual plan acknowledges that upwards to 65 existing spaces are lost. When you add 65 to 39, there is the potential to reduce parking by over 100 spaces that was not shared with the public. In this light, the conceptual plan is not increasing parking. Instead, we are reducing the number of parking spaces and having a profound negative impact on the businesses and residences that make up the downtown area. City leaders need to do more than simply tinker with this conceptually flawed parking plan before spending taxpayer's dollars on its implementation. The conceptual plan as it currently stands creates a negative economic drag on the downtown business core. It can be argued that the plan's implementation over time will create a negative rate of return for the taxpayer.

Back in 1979 and again in 1987 and 1988, efforts were undertaken here in Franklin to improve parking in the downtown core and historic neighborhoods. A limited number of ideas from this planning process were implemented. When you compare the 1988 plan to the current conceptual plan, there are substantial inconsistencies in the number of parking spaces the conceptual plan believes it can create out of existing spaces. The current conceptual plan calls for expanding the city parking lot on Water and Monroe from 55 parking spaces to 75 parking spaces. The notes in the file from the 1988 plan show that this estimate is simply incorrect. The 1988 plan called for adding 11 parking spaces to the city lot. The 1988 plan called for adding definition to the city alley running from Water to South Home Avenue, relocating the transformer platform on the south side of this alley, and creating a green buffer at the east end of the parking lot from residual space behind the homes on South Home Avenue. The 1988 plan envisioned closing a series of entrances and reconfiguring the city lot with a more efficient traffic pattern. The 1988 plan kept in place the necessary infrastructure for the Lion's Fish Fry while adding green space on Water Street and definition through tree planting. The 1988 plan left in place the use of this parking lot for festivals and special events. The 1988 plan called for uniform lighting, similar to what is found today around Franklin College. The 1988 plan was well thought out and provided far more detail than the current conceptual plan. This plan costs far less than what is being proposed today, but was not implemented due to budget limitations.

In 1988 there was resistance to removing the bank building at the corner of Madison and North Main Street. Here, the conceptual plan being proposed makes sense. Removing this structure and establishing a more effective parking and traffic flow by merging the space into one uniform lot and setting aside an appropriate green space for trees should be seriously considered. As part of this consideration, elected officials should take a hard look at adding uniform lighting (similar to the lighting found around Franklin College) and electrical and water outlets to create the opportunity to use this parking lot for festivals.

The conceptual plan being proposed today for Franklin's Courthouse and Monroe Avenue are not based on economic reality, sound traffic engineering or sound traffic flow theory. The current conceptual plan undermines the efforts taken to establish the Branigin Boulevard traffic pattern and makes little sense in light of this investment in infrastructure. The current traffic flow in the downtown core allows for easy access to merchants on East Court and pulls traffic off of Jefferson Street southbound to reduce turning motions onto Jefferson Street. The current traffic pattern around the Courthouse pulls traffic toward the Monroe Avenue businesses on the south side of the Courthouse square. This traffic pattern, along with making Water Street two ways up to Jefferson Street, should be maintained. Restricting urban spaces into walkable places around the Courthouse square does not create economic development. The conceptual plan has the potential of negatively impacting existing businesses and neighborhoods with its flawed proposed traffic patterns. The conceptual plan has no data or rationale for making these suggestions.

A hidden tragedy within the current conceptual plan is how the plan tries to create greenspace. The plan being discussed today disregards the physical limitations of what can and cannot be planted along a state highway and puts in place an infrastructure that will not sustain a long-term urban forest while negatively impacting the community. The islands of greenery proposed in the plan are only heatsinks that would lead to the death of the trees planted in them and represent a misstep in Franklin's future. Back in 1988, an idea to create an urban greenspace just west of the Oren Wright building was rejected. Today, this open space presents an opportunity for Franklin to create a practical pocket park that can sustain an urban forest. City leaders should seriously consider reconfiguring this open space into a farmer's market pocket park. This dual use would provide additional parking and add stability to the current farmer's market that is held in this space. The addition of this urban greenspace designed as a dual use public good is just what downtown Franklin needs. Creating this kind of space in our downtown core creates a destination for shoppers and visitors by giving permanency to the farmer's market concept.

The conceptual plan does make sense when you are trying to eliminate 1950's guard rails and soften the visual impact these current spaces have on the downtown core. Additional parking spaces are not necessarily created from the removal of guardrails, but from the reconfiguration of these existing spaces into more efficient parking lots. In several cases, a choice will have to be made between increasing parking and including an appropriately sized tree planting space. Compromising the parking lot design by creating a postage stamp sized place to plant a tree is a disservice to the idea of planting trees. City leaders should reconfigure the current conceptual plan to add tree planting footprints that would allow for the planting of legacy trees that will stand the test of time.

An example of the legacy tree planting concept could be easily applied to the Courthouse lawn itself. The Courthouse lawn needs to have a defined space to remember our veterans and a series of sidewalks that guide pedestrians to their destinations. After these elements are defined, there is room to enhance the urban environment by planting a series of legacy trees on the Courthouse lawn.

For example, on the southeast corner of the Courthouse lawn, the current Christmas trees should be removed and in their place a legacy tree should be planted. There is also room to plant a legacy tree on the southwest corner of the Courthouse square. An urban forest tree streetscape can also be added to the existing west court lawn area, next to the Annex. These kinds of suggestions are practical, do not adversely affect businesses, and substantially increase the character of the downtown. They are the kinds of tree plantings that leave a legacy for the next generation.

It goes without saying that adding additional perimeter parking with a new lot on Wayne and Jackson makes sense. Creating an effective urban forestry greenspace along South Main Street is more of a challenge, but it is achievable. Adding trees to the existing City Building parking lot also presents a design challenge. This City Building parking space could see the development of a tree planting space where a legacy tree for the future could be planted to mature over time.

When tinkering with the urban environment, city leaders need to be respectful of businesses and homeowners. These groups of vested interests have chosen to make investments in our downtown. This commitment by these groups to long-term investment in Franklin needs to be respected. City leaders must also take into account the consistent failures by the Redevelopment Commission and its affiliated groups to produce any plan or concept that is based on rationality. Past conceptual plans by the Redevelopment Commission and its affiliates have been heavily flawed and are riddled with impractical design elements that do not take into account the realities of urban space. Whatever plan is undertaken by city leaders, a note of caution should be sounded today that tearing up sidewalks and running new electrical lines means cutting existing tree root systems and may lead to the loss of the urban forest we have today. Please be careful where you dig and who you hire to dig.

There are ways to add additional historic lighting, improve parking and create a traffic flow in the downtown core that interfaces with pedestrians and creates additional economic opportunity for businesses. The Forestry Foundation that Terri and I have been involved with since the 1980s is willing to step forward and help modify the current plan so that whatever is undertaken will be here 100 years from today.

I know I sound a bit like a broken record, and I appreciate you taking the time to consider these thoughts. If the City Council is willing to spend resources in this area, it should be commended, but these expenditures should be done wisely on infrastructure changes that will stand the test of time.

Travel safe,

Garry Petersen

For additional information about the Forestry Foundation, please go to forestryfoundation.com

P.S. Yes it's true, in the late '80s I drove around Franklin with a watering truck from the Franklin Sewer Department. Please remember to plant the trees in the fall and find a better way to water them than the way we tried in the '80s.