



June 15, 2018

Mayor Tornek and City Council Members  
City of Pasadena  
100 North Garfield Avenue  
Pasadena, California 91101

RE: Recommendations of the Civic Center Task Force to the City Council

Dear Honorable Mayor Tornek and members of the City Council:

Pasadena Heritage appreciates the opportunity to express support for the work and recommendations of the Civic Center Task Force. We were pleased to have a representative on the Task Force, Claire Bogaard, who has a long involvement with, and a deep understanding of, the Civic Center, its history, individual buildings, and the many previous studies and plans to improve and protect this critically important place. Much progress has been made since the Task Force's initial meeting in October 2017, and we are pleased to see that the recommendations now being presented to you are aligned with the goals of preserving and enlivening the nationally-significant Civic Center and finding a new, productive use for the Julia-Morgan-designed former YWCA building.

We have reviewed the recommendations and are in general concurrence with them. We also agree, overall, with the Guiding Principles and the twenty action steps identified by the Task Force to achieve them. We note that they mirror to a large extent the goals Pasadena Heritage established for itself when seeking solutions to re-use the former YWCA once it had been acquired by the City.

For your consideration, we have provided specific comments below that follow the sequence of the Recommendations of the Civic Center Task Force. As you consider the specific recommendations, we ask that you keep foremost in your minds that the Civic Center, and the Bennett Plan that was its inspiration, are of the highest importance to Pasadena and its citizenry. The Bennett Plan, though impacted over time by some unfortunate intrusions, remains largely as it was envisioned and adopted by the City in 1925. The three main civic buildings (the Central Library, City Hall, and the Civic Auditorium) as well as the north-south axis along Garfield Ave., and the east-west axis from City Hall to its curtailment by the 210 Freeway, remain largely intact. The Civic Center has been nationally recognized as one of the best-preserved City Beautiful civic places in the country and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Bennett Plan received both regional and national awards from the American Planning Association as a noteworthy and historically significant plan that has stood the test of time.

In addition, as you know, Pasadena Heritage has long been concerned about the future of the former YWCA. Designed by noted architect Julia Morgan, the first woman to graduate from L'Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris and designer of many buildings for women's institutions (Mills

College, YWCA buildings, women's clubs) as well as the world-famous Hearst Castle, the former YWCA is a treasure in our midst that predates the Civic Center. The preservation and proper treatment of this edifice is of the highest priority to us, along with respect for and carefully considered enhancement of the entire Civic Center as a whole. In order for the YWCA to be rehabilitated and restored, we believe that some new development will be needed on the site. The cost of rehabilitation will be significant (and is only growing as time passes), and it seems impossible that the building, itself, can generate enough revenue to pay those costs. A new use should fit comfortably into the existing building and bring new activity and public life to the Civic Center. New construction should be of the highest quality and design and contribute to the civic quality of the District.

We believe that most all of those who have expressed interest and concern about the future of the Civic Center share many common goals. The sticking point appears to have continued through the Task Force's process and boils down to how much green space should be left in place across from City Hall. We believe that it is valid and appropriate to consider new buildings there (both south and north of Holly Street), as set forth in the Bennett Plan. New buildings facing City Hall have been contemplated many times in the past though never built. It is also a valid point that the community has become accustomed to the open space across from City Hall. Though little used, the open space can be considered to have some historic significance as it has persisted over time. The current recommendations for setback and building height would allow for some new buildings to face City Hall and better define Centennial Plaza while preserving a pleasing green-space that should be more formally and attractively landscaped.

With those thoughts before you, below we will address the specifics of the Task Force's recommendations.

## **GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

Pasadena Heritage supports the Guiding Principles, as unanimously agreed upon by the Task Force, to inform all recommendations relating to setbacks/open space, building height, land use, and public improvements. These include:

1. Preserve/restore/rehabilitate the YWCA
2. Preservation of public open space is a high priority
3. Planning should be symmetrical across the YWCA and YMCA sites
4. Bring life to the Civic Center
5. Preserve and enhance the pedestrian experience
6. Inspire a sense of civic pride

While the above goals are appropriate, we believe that an additional Guiding Principle should be added to "protect the significance and integrity of the Civic Center." As noted above, the Civic Center is a unique and extremely significant cultural resource designed by William H. Bennett and those who collaborated with him, an outstanding example of Beaux-Arts planning and design in the United States, and the heart of our city. There should be a Guiding Principle that duly recognizes this and governs all decisions related to the Civic Center's future.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Pasadena Heritage generally concurs with the Task Force's recommendations with regard to setbacks/open space, building height, land use, and public improvements. As explained below, we have a few additional recommendations to strengthen the recommendations.

### ***Setbacks/Open Space***

We understand that Task Force members differed in their views with regard to the recommended setback from the back of the Garfield Ave. sidewalk for any new construction east of the former YWCA or YMCA buildings. It is our opinion that the proposed 52.5 foot setback, which the majority of Task Force members supported, would align with the Guiding Principles by preserving open space while providing an opportunity for appropriate new construction to enliven the Civic Center and instill a sense of civic pride. Importantly, this setback would also allow the Civic Center to be completed as originally envisioned in the Bennett Plan. Pasadena Heritage would also find a smaller setback acceptable, as long as a reasonable amount of green space would remain. We have also suggested in the past, and suggest again, that some of the parking area along Garfield Ave. on the east side of the sidewalk (6-10 feet) could be reconfigured as landscaped space, adding to the green space along Garfield Ave. while still allowing for parking.

### ***Building Height***

We concur with the Task Force's unanimous recommendation that the heights of new building on the west side of Garfield Ave. be limited to the cornice height (approximately 54 feet) of both wings of City Hall and that building height decline towards the former YWCA to achieve a more compatible height and massing with the historic building.

### ***Land Use***

We agree with the Task Force's unanimous recommendation that the City implement Actions 3 and 18 of the Actions to Achieve the Guiding Principles, at least in part. These include studying a mix of public and private uses in the Civic Center, prioritizing public access, and considering public/private amenities and land uses that go beyond typical office uses in order to attract pedestrians and diverse segments of the community outside of regular business hours. We do not, however, agree that the best use of the building would be for additional low-income housing or facilities for the homeless. The former YMCA already provides very low-income housing in the Civic Center.

### ***Public Improvements***

We support the recommendation that Centennial Plaza remain open to both pedestrians and automobiles. However, we recognize that circulation is presently problematic and heartily support the recommendation that conflicts between foot and automobile traffic be resolved. To that end, we believe that design improvements to better direct traffic would make Centennial Plaza more safe and pedestrian friendly. The installation of attractively landscaped medians within Garfield Ave. north and south of Centennial Plaza could enhance the Civic Center. The incorporation of the originally indicated fountains north and south of the Plaza would be a nice touch as well. Finally, we agree with the Task Force that the double row of

Englemann Oaks on Holly Street should be retained, appropriate public art on the north side of Holly Street should be installed to compliment and balance the Robinson Memorial, and that a hardscape feature should be installed at the center of Centennial Plaza to reinforce its axial Beaux-Arts plan, better guide automobile traffic, and permit pedestrian activities.

### **ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED ACTIONS TO ACHIVE THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

Pasadena Heritage generally supports the twenty actions recommended by the Task Force to achieve the Guiding Principles. As noted during several Task Force meetings, we agree that the City's should consider commissioning a Cultural Landscape Report for the Civic Center area to supplement the National Register of Historic Places nomination. Such a study would identify and rank character-defining features of the District as primary, secondary, and tertiary and provide a baseline for all decisions related the Civic Center's future.

Thank you for considering our comments and recommendations. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely yours,



Susan N. Mossman  
*Executive Director*



Adam F. Rajper  
*Preservation Director*