



Palmer Historical Society
PO Box 1935
Palmer, AK 99645

November 21, 2022

To: Palmer City Council
Board of Economic Development

Regarding: Proposed Community Projects for the Downtown Palmer Railbelt

This letter is in response to the informational meeting at the Depot on October 26, 2022, and the Survey provided our community to give our feedback on proposed changes to the core downtown Palmer Railbelt area. Specifically, from Fireweed Ave to Arctic Ave.

The Survey questions, and dropdown menu selections are limited, with inadequate opportunity for comments (limited keyboard clicks allowed). A ranking from 1 through 5 was a must or the Survey could not be submitted. If one didn't complete or agree with certain sections and wanted to leave them blank, the Survey couldn't be submitted.

The Palmer Historical Society Board of Directors respectfully offers the following input not allowed in the Survey.

The Railroad Tracks in their entirety are an invaluable link between Palmer's historic past and future opportunities for resource development and diversified tourism. Palmer's history is steeped in the fact that we are a Railbelt community. Historically, rail service to Palmer was key in the development of this community and commerce in our town and beyond. Palmer's history is Alaska history and United States history as well. We have a responsibility beyond today to keep history alive for future generations. Having a Depot, and a train engine without tracks leaves us looking like a two legged milking stool. A look back at the 2002 Revitalization plan shows the importance of the Depot, the Railroad tracks, Agriculture and Farming in Palmer. Our history includes the railroad tracks and was foundational to Palmer becoming what it is today. Future progress should remain true to the history of Palmer. It's been said that the ARRC won't fund repairs of the intersections, so the only option is removal. We strongly oppose removing the railroad tracks from Fireweed Ave to Arctic Ave. We believe there are solutions that can leave the tracks in place at intersections as well as create green areas for event spaces while the tracks remain in place. Please present solutions other than removing the tracks for public review and input.

Parking in Historic Downtown Areas typically have the majority of parking in parking lots behind the buildings as we currently do and that should be optimized. Angled parking has been tried in the past and it turned out to be quite dangerous. Adding parking spaces, in what is currently green space (as suggested) would be considered a huge step backward. Our Green spaces have been part of past plans that the residents have sought and asked for. We strongly oppose the idea to Pave Paradise and put up a parking lot. The residents of Palmer and our visitors enjoy our unique small town appeal and visit (and move here) in large numbers each year. Parking lots and "the big city look" should not be a goal. We strongly oppose a plan to take away the unique history of our town and create a look that reflects 'Anytown USA'. Visitors come to Palmer specifically because of our history and beautiful features of our historic down town area – Not because it looks like something they see in Anchorage, Wasilla or the Lower 48.

Parks And Playgrounds, and an Amphitheater In The Downtown Corridor – The cost initially, and upkeep costs and labor for the City, would much better be spent supporting and developing businesses in our downtown. Bringing folks downtown is a great goal! Bringing them in to spend money is the best goal! Without that our historic downtown goes the way of many others and becomes a place that business owners won't invest in. Parks, playgrounds, and an amphitheater have the potential to bring folks into the downtown area to spend time – but they don't add to the revenue goal for our downtown businesses. The amphitheater could be used for free summer concerts and in the unused times remain an inviting space for vagrancy and graffiti. Parks and playgrounds attract the same kinds of vagrancy and graffiti. The Amusement Park is a prime example of the intention of creating a space for children to play and yet parents hesitate to use it with their children due to vagrancy and graffiti. We advise not bringing that to our downtown corridor. The City has had to implement a Volunteer program to keep up with maintaining our parks already – adding more parks/playgrounds to the downtown corridor creates additional workload for the overburdened City staff and has the potential to add to the burden the business owners already have with current vagrancy.

Is this proposed playground plan the same plan that is listed in the Areawide Plan Study (AWP) Stantec Report of 2020? Page 77 item 10 indicates a plan for a Depot Plaza and railroad themed play area south of the Depot to support seasonal festivities and year round use and interest by residents. If this is the playground plan, then presenting the plan to the public as a continuation of the 2020 AWP rather than a brand new endeavor would be a benefit when asking for information and feedback. The 2020 AWP states many times the importance of creating public spaces that can be enjoyed all year long, not a few months of the year. Are the plans for parks, playgrounds, and amphitheater cohesive with the 2020 AWP for enjoyment of the public spaces all year long? Has the AWP 2020 Plan been discontinued or is this a loose continuation of the plan? Either way the public should be made aware of that.

Rails to Trails and Walkability In The Downtown Corridor – It's wonderful to experience while in our historic downtown. With a view like ours it's a priceless adventure! Let's not lose sight of our roots steeped in Rails, Farming and Agriculture by taking out the historic rails and replacing agriculture/green spaces with parking spots. There are many ways to showcase agriculture and include trails in the downtown area with the railroad tracks in place. A Rails to Trails program needs to include keeping the rails.

Question 5 Of The Survey asks how to make our downtown corridor better for Seniors and people with disabilities. Inclusivity for all residents and visitors regardless of their age or ability should be a goal. Outside of the items listed, which might create a better experience for Seniors or people with disabilities, a question could be asked "What is preventing any visitor from enjoying downtown as it is?" That information would lend to a better understanding of what needs are there. Again, the focus is to have people spend money in our downtown area, keep the history, and have an enjoyable experience while doing so. That's the perfect three legged milking stool approach. It makes sense – financially, historically and for the future.

Our logo – Rails and Water tower, two very important pieces of Palmer history. Although the rails aren't in use it doesn't mean they aren't useful or beneficial. Our water tower is a much loved Palmer landmark that people wouldn't dream of removing because it's not in use. Our rails deserve the same consideration. Our history and story of the rails needs to continue for future generations. Let's consider solutions other than removal to keep our beautiful downtown Railbelt corridor with rails intact.

Sincerely,
Palmer Historical Society
Board of Directors