



Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board

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Date: February 21, 2023 (for Feb. 24, 2023 CAAPB meeting)

To: Members of the Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board (CAAPB)

From: Merritt Clapp-Smith, Executive Secretary and Peter Musty, Principal Planner and Administrator of the Zoning and Design Rules, CAAPB

Subject: **The Comprehensive Plan and the State Office Building Project**

The Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board has several review roles the proposed renovation and expansion of the State Office Building. The Board must evaluate the project and its related activities for:

1. Compliance with the 2040 Comprehensive Plan for the Minnesota Capitol Area.
2. Rezoning of properties to enable the proposed changes in land use.
3. Design review/approval of the building appearance, changes to internal public and ceremonial spaces, and external site improvements, including review for compliance with MN Rules Chapter 2400: Zoning and Design Rules for the MN Capitol Area.

The Board may only consider items 2 and 3 if item 1 is affirmed.

Beginning to Evaluate Compliance with Comprehensive Plan

At the February 24, 2023 CAAP Board meeting, the Department of Administration and CAAPB staff will introduce key elements of the Comprehensive Plan to be considered in review of the State Office Building Project. Board members will be invited to ask questions and share their thoughts, but **the Board does not need to determine (vote on) Comprehensive Plan consistency at this meeting.** A thorough CAAPB staff and Advisors' analysis on Comprehensive Plan consistency will be provided to the Board in March and voted on by the Board at its next meeting (to be scheduled for end of March). If the Board determines at the end of March that the State Office Building project and associated activities are consistent with the Comprehensive Plan, then the Board can vote on rezoning and on zoning and design approvals later in the spring. A final Certificate of Design Compliance is then approved right before construction, to ensure the City review process has not changed the design approved by CAAPB. This memo identifies Comprehensive Plan observations, principles, themes and questions relevant to consideration of the State Office Building project.

Principle 1: As Minnesota's seat of government and destination for thousands each year, the Capitol Area offers the highest quality experience to visitors.

- a) How do the SOB addition, land around it, and related activities influence the visitor experience to the Capitol campus?

- b) The visitor experience is heavily influenced by visitors' first impressions of arriving at the Capitol campus. How does that arrival look and feel? Is it a positive experience? Since Leif Erickson Park is one of the primary entry points to the Capitol campus, it's vital that the space and wayfinding provides a welcoming and pleasant experience.
- c) Redesign of public spaces around the State Office Building must focus on the visitor experience of it as a gateway for people moving between transit arrivals or parking in the Rice and University area and the Capitol and campus, and as a visitation and gathering place in its own right.

Principle 2: The Capitol Building and Mall are central to the identity of Saint Paul and are a unifying focal point for the city, as Cass Gilbert once envisioned.

- a) The physical and visual approach to the campus from the northwest currently happens through the space of Leif Erickson Park, which offers a breadth of views and access to the western steps of the Capitol and the Mall. The proposed SOB addition extends north into the open space of Leif Erickson Park, reducing openness and changing the nature of the Capitol approach and visitor experience from the west and northwest. The change in approach is less visible from a distance but is clearer in proximity. Views of the Capitol Building from near and far are part of the urbanism, pride and identity of the City that the CAAPB has long been tasked to protect. The Comp Plan affirms the importance of these views.
- b) Honoring the prominence of the Capitol and the Mall as a focal point and identity for Saint Paul will depend on creating new, highly visible pathways and spaces that draw the visitor and their eye toward the grand staircase of the Capitol and into the Mall space. Evaluation of the experience also should be in reverse; what is the experience of people emerging from the Capitol and looking to the west?
- c) The CAAPB plans to update of the Capitol Mall Design Framework in the coming year, as required by the Comprehensive Plan. This provides an opportunity to pursue an additional state investment to address how the Capitol Mall can best serve the people for years to come. The Mall functions in relation to buildings and spaces around it, and the Mall Framework update should focus in detail on design of the Leif Erickson Park spaces and their evolving function around an SOB addition. Following consultation with CAAPB staff, legislation is being developed that would provide for substantial investment in the Mall plan.

Principle 3: The Capitol Area is a model for Minnesota, where best practices are expected in the planning, design and development of public and private projects.

- a) Chapter 3 looks through a holistic lens at how projects in the 60-block Capitol Area collectively advance best practices in 5 categories -- Healthy Living; Communities & Families; Placemaking & Identity; Economic Vitality; Energy & Environment.
- b) The State Office Building project narrowly defined as a renovated and expanded building might advance some the categories above, particularly related to building design that provides a healthy environment for its occupants and uses sustainable building technologies.
- c) The State Office Building project broadly defined includes related opportunities and activities that it can catalyze. The project is uniquely positioned to advance best practices in the other 5 categories with adjacent planning and investments in open spaces, community places, economic vitality and placemaking.

- d) CAAPB staff are providing assistance in the development of additional initiatives in the Capitol Rice area that leverage the momentum of this project to achieve broad and positive change in the Capitol Rice District. More information about possible projects will be presented to the Board at a future meeting.

Principle 4: The entire Capitol Area provides an integrated, high quality, human scale public realm experience.

- a) A renovated State Office Building and the spaces around it should emphasize mobility improvements for constituents, visitors, workers, and community, with clear wayfinding within and around the building.
- b) The large size of the State Office Building and addition may overwhelm the spaces around it. Public open spaces around and near the building and site can provide a human scale experience if carefully designed with input from Capitol Area workers and visitors.
- c) New open spaces designed for active public use should be created to compensate for those lost by the State Office Building addition. Leif Erickson Park holds an important role (current and future) as one of a small number of truly accessible (ADA) public space on campus with convenient access to mobility and parking infrastructure. How can this project improve and expand spaces with similar accessible connections?
- d) Connectivity on foot between the Rice Street area and the Capitol, Mall, and other parts of campus should not be lengthened or made less comfortable.
- e) Access to campus tunnel systems for visitors and workers should be addressed carefully, as mentioned in the Comp Plan in relation to Leif Erickson Park. Should/could access be improved? Will tunnel access for all campus visitors and workers be part of the wayfinding and orientation?

Principle 5: The Capitol Area is an urban multi-modal district, seamlessly connected to destinations.

- a) The State Office Building project includes a new vehicular turnaround from Rice Street and has adjacent sidewalks and accessible facilities. This is an improvement from the current building and makes access easier from the west.
- b) Other important connections and wayfinding should cater to transit riders, bicyclists, and to access points on the east.
- c) Vehicular and bicycle parking should be convenient and safe, and places of rest provided for pedestrian visitors.
- d) Since the 1990s, the State has set goals to reduce Single Occupancy Vehicles (SOV's) trips to and from the Capitol campus, with the intent of reducing local air pollution and the demand for auto-based infrastructure such as surface parking lots. The Comprehensive Plan identifies a goal (5.20) of reducing SOV trips to be 50% or fewer of all travel to/from the campus. The State Office Building project can leverage an improved pedestrian infrastructure providing attractive and accessible connections in the northwest area of the campus to transit, the community, and the Rice Street commercial district.
- e) Implementation of the Mobility Hub identified in Chapter 7a would advance an important part of the Comprehensive Plan policy for the area.

Principle 7A: The Capitol Rice District is an Urban Village with Leif Erickson Park at its center.

The Capitol Campus meets people's needs to gather, demonstrate and celebrate in groups large and small. Provision of open space to allow for public gathering is a fundamental right of our free society and form of government and is essential to the Capitol visitor experience.

Different areas of the Mall and Capitol Building meet various needs of gatherings for groups and individuals. The Capitol Mall must remain a place that accommodates both individual quiet reflection and public gathering. – Comp Plan page 41

- a) The most challenging aspect of the State Office Building project from a Comprehensive Plan perspective is the extension of the building addition into the middle of Leif Erickson Park. The Comprehensive Plan envisioned an improved Leif Erickson Park as a central square with surface parking removed and public functions enhanced. The addition reduces the open space and changes its configuration from a square into an L-shape wrapping around the west and north of the addition.
- b) How can the loss/displacement of Leif Erickson Park's as a major western campus park and center of Capitol Rice District be mitigated or replaced?
- c) Consultations with impacted neighboring institutions (such as the St. Paul City School, office buildings, and the church) that have invested in their relationships to the Capitol Building and Mall will help to determine how they are impacted.
- d) The Comprehensive Plan recognized the historic role of Leif Erickson Park as a place for civic expression and free speech. It has served as a secondary space to the Mall for protests, prayer vigils and political gatherings. It was often used simultaneously with Mall events, as a counterpoint to whatever view was being demonstrated there. As a secondary space to the Mall, it had physical separation but visual connection. The State Office Building addition impedes the relationship between the two spaces. It seems that it will be important to identify a new space for civic expression that is distinct from and visible to the Mall and the seats of power (House, Senate and Capitol).

In Summary

Careful design and a larger set of activities around the State Office Building project could help offset 'micro-level' compliance issues created by the addition and provide a 'macro-level' net benefit that implements parts of the Comprehensive Plan. Subsequent board meetings will provide for further opportunity to explore this approach.