

Levesque, Jennifer

From: Erin Hamm [REDACTED]
Sent: Friday, June 18, 2021 11:02 AM
To: cityclerk
Subject: Public Comment for the Arbor Walk Way Agenda Item K4, File 21-467

It has come to my attention that there's a plan in the works to give back the City's easement for the Arbor Walkway. I'm dismayed that downtown businesses have not been made aware of this plan. The walkway has been closed for more than a month now due to renovations at 531 W. Main. As a result, nearby businesses have been impacted. Anecdotally, I've heard people say they haven't walked over to Toni's Courtyard Café because it's a hassle without the walkway access. Or they didn't end up going to Second Time Around because they couldn't find parking on Main and knowing the Arbor Walkway was closed they just didn't stop. The walkway is utilized by pedestrians to conveniently move between local businesses and desperately needed parking in the vicinity.

My understanding from the city council agenda is that the owner of 531 W. Main will be gifted this land. I'm told he plans to put a wrought iron gate at both ends to prevent free flowing pedestrian traffic. That's unacceptable.

I met with the owner to understand his vision, desire and ultimate plan. He shared that he intends to grant access to business owners only. What about the consumers who want to walk back and forth? And as a downtown owner, I do NOT wish to walk between two locked gates—how unsafe is that?! Imagine if someone follows me in and before I can get to the second gate, I'm assaulted. There is no escape and this is not safe.

I recognize there have been issues with homeless and vandalism in this walkway. The owner of 531 W Main, Dwight Larks, has complained about broken windows, graffiti, vagrants, vandals, tweakers, public nudity, and human feces. Please tell me an area of downtown that has not had one or more of these issues. I don't believe it exists. It's all happened in front of my business and across the street and around the corner. Is the city going to allow every business owner to erect fences and gates? That's not a solution; not a real option. Instead of allowing a special space to be closed, let's spend more time focusing on public safety in the downtown area as a whole.

Additionally, in researching this easement, I learned that the City paid \$95,183 in 1979 for this right of way (1979 dollars—what's that today?!!) and installed electricity and plumbing, put in flower beds and erected street lamps. Is that just to be abandoned? Is a Steve Carrigan deal really one the city is eager to chase without further research? Does the City truly believe it's a better idea to direct people to walk through alleys?

I read in the council agenda attachments for the Monday, June 21st meeting pertaining to this matter which state that "notices were conspicuously posted along the lines of the property proposed to be vacated" on June 7th. I am a tenant in the building along the lines of the property proposed to be vacated and the first I heard of this was Wednesday, June 16th when I asked the City Manager how much longer 531 W. Main is permitted to have the Arbor Walkway closed. She shared the plan for the abandonment of the easement. I then started asking my downtown neighbors if they'd heard about this. *Not a single business had.* Not even the Merced Main Street Association was informed of this proposal nor the Merced Chamber of Commerce. I can only conclude that no real effort was made to make downtown businesses aware of the change and ultimate planned closure. So who's this benefiting beyond Dwight? Does anyone care?

Mr. Mayor and City Council members, thank you for holding a public hearing on this matter. I urge you to reconsider abandoning the Arbor Walkway. I urge you to truly seek the input of downtown businesses before making a rash decision. Is this truly in the best interest of our community? Of our revitalizing downtown? The decision to make traffic one way on Main is phenomenal and has been helpful to downtown. The added parking is great. The closure of this walkway undermines your attempts to improve parking and make downtown more pedestrian friendly. Please do what's

best for downtown and not just one business owner who seeks to convert a walkway into a dining venue. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Erin Hamm
Downtown Business Owner



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