

# THE RICHARDSON OLMSTED COMPLEX MASTER PLAN

## FINAL Master Plan Comments

Prepared by the Community Advisory Group

With support from the Urban Design Project

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### I. Overview

This report from the Community Advisory Group (CAG) to the Richardson Center Corporation (RCC) and Master Plan consultant team is an overview of community comments on the draft Master Plan through the final public meeting on the Master Plan on July 14, 2009. It is the final of three reports from the CAG to the RCC. The first report, the Community Vision Report, provided a summary of the community vision, goals and objectives for the project. The second report provided a summary of public comments regarding the Draft Master Plan. *This report provides a summary of Final Master Plan comments, building from the second report. New comments since the second report are italicized in this report.*

These reports are meant to inform ongoing RCC deliberations by providing the Board with input from a broad base of community members at critical junctures in the project development and review process. This Final Master Plan Comments report documents community feedback on how well the public feels that the Master Plan addresses the issues, goals, and objectives of the Community Vision report. This report was informed by feedback from the Community Advisory Group and their constituents, public meeting comments, and comments directed to the RCC by email or through their web site.

This report begins with a summary of the community involvement process as well as an overview of the Community Advisory Group (CAG). It also describes the public feedback process for planning for the Architecture and Visitor Center.

The following summaries of Master Plan comments are available on the RCC website:

- The November 11, 2008, January 6, 2009, April 16, 2009, and June 29, 2009 Community Advisory Group meetings.
- The January 27, 2009 and July 14, 2009 public meetings.

### II. Description of the Community Involvement Process

Community involvement is vital to the success of the rehabilitation of the Richardson Olmsted Complex. The RCC provides many avenues for community involvement through the planning process. Open public meetings as well as numerous interviews and small meetings have been associated with each aspect of

the process. The community had the opportunity to review numerous reports and studies including the 2007 Urban Land Institute Study, the Historic Structures Report, the Cultural Landscape Report, and the Architecture and Visitor Center Concept Study. The RCC website provides archived documents and reports, information about the complex and its rehabilitation efforts, and is a forum for public comments and feedback. In April 2008, the RCC formally introduced its Master Plan consulting team to the public. To date, public engagement has included the establishment and facilitation of the Community Advisory Group, and the facilitation of two additional public meetings. The Community Advisory Group has met seven times during this process.

A Richardson Olmsted Complex Master Plan public meeting was held on August 12, 2008 at the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society. Over 160 people attended the public meeting. The presentation included a brief overview and updates on RCC work, including progress on stabilization efforts and planning for the Architecture and Visitor Center. The final Historic Structures Report and Cultural Landscape Report were also presented. The Master Plan team gave an overview of their scope of work and presented an initial analysis of the reuse potential of the site and precedents for redevelopment.

Another public meeting was held on January 27, 2009 at the Performing Arts Center at Rockwell Hall. Approximately 240 people attended. The presentation included a brief overview and updates on stabilization efforts and the Architecture and Visitors Center Concept Study. The Master Plan team presented the draft plan for rehabilitating the buildings and grounds.

*A public meeting for the Master Plan was held on July 14, 2009, again at the Performing Arts Center at Rockwell Hall. Approximately 145 people attended this meeting. The presentation included a brief overview of progress and next steps on stabilization efforts. The Master Plan team presented the final Master Plan, and described ways in which it addresses both the RCC goals and community goals.*

At each public meeting, the attendees were given opportunities to provide feedback to the RCC and the Master Plan team in multiple ways. At the first two public meetings, the audience was polled during the presentation using “clickers” to assess community values and priorities. These questions led to open ended discussions and a chance for the audience to make general comments. *At the third public meeting, the presentation ended by giving the audience an opportunity to comment on the Master Plan and ask questions to the consultants and RCC representatives.* At all three meetings, each attendee was also given a comment card and asked to return it with any comments. The attendees were also directed to the “community involvement” page of the RCC website where additional opportunities for comments are available.

*The Draft Master Plan will now receive further evaluation as it goes through the mandatory State Environmental Quality Review (SEQR) process. A Generic Environmental Impact Statement (GEIS) will be prepared to provide the public with a thorough assessment of the potential environmental impacts of the project. Opportunities for public comment will be available during this process. The RCC will continue to work with the public as the Master Plan is implemented. The RCC can be contacted through email, phone, or through their web site.*

### **III. Overview of the Community Advisory Group**

The Community Advisory Group includes representatives from neighboring cultural institutions, the Buffalo Psychiatric Center, community business organizations, neighborhood groups, a Buffalo State College student, historic preservation groups, and a city planner. In May 2008, the RCC Board invited community representatives to join the group. Potential representatives were selected from lists of people from past Urban Land Institute studies and interviews and attendees of previous public meetings. Additional representatives were added based upon recommendations from the Community Advisory Group.

The mission of the Community Advisory Group is to ensure broad community engagement in the Master Plan process as well as to encourage potential partner understanding, support, and commitment to the proposed project.

Specific CAG responsibilities include:

- Advising the RCC regarding community values related to the Richardson Olmsted Complex Master Plan.
- Facilitating the process of broad public engagement throughout the planning process. This includes convening of the three large public meetings, routine Community Advisory Group meetings, and deliberations with different constituencies.
- Reviewing Master Plan products as they are produced, with public comments.

### **IV. Public Comments on the Final Master Plan**

#### **A. Comments on the Architecture and Visitor Center**

Planning for the Architecture and Visitor Center has paralleled Master Plan work. Initial thinking about the Architecture and Visitor Center assumed occupancy of the iconic tower building (“Building 45”) which includes about 50,000 gross square feet of floor area.

Initially, some CAG members and other members of the public expressed concerns over the Architecture and Visitor Center’s size, cost, and location. At the request of the CAG, a special meeting was held to discuss the Architecture and Visitor Center in November, 2008. The RCC Board and the Architecture and Visitor Center and Master Plan teams have worked together to address these concerns and as a result of feasibility studies have made adjustments in the project concepts.

#### *Size and Cost*

As a consultant on the Master Plan team, ConsultEcon’s initial work on the feasibility analysis resulted in a mid range attendance projection of roughly 75,000 visits per year. In addition, an examination of comparable architecture centers (Paris, Netherlands, Chicago) found that such facilities tend to occupy

10,000 to 15,000 square feet of space. This research suggested a reduced size of 10,000 to 12,000 square feet, in order for the operating budget to be sustainable.

At a September workshop with the Richardson Architecture Center board, members of the community and the consultants explored the idea of a combined Architecture and Visitor Center and boutique hotel amenities in Building 45. Subsequent market studies show that there is a market for boutique, high end hotel space of up to 150 rooms. There would be beneficial synergies between hotel space, conference space, and the Architecture and Visitor Center. These synergies are necessary to help increase the financial sustainability of each.

#### *Location*

The concept of a regional visitor center received solid support. The Architecture and Visitor Center, if located in the Richardson Complex, may have many positive impacts on the surrounding community, its cultural institutions, and its businesses. Some CAG members continue to be concerned that the Richardson Olmsted Complex may not be the best location for the region's visitor center. Moving the visitor center away from downtown Buffalo may hurt businesses in downtown. The community would like the consultant team to clarify whether or not the visitor center downtown would be moved to the Richardson Olmsted Complex, and whether the conceptual Architecture and Visitor Center will be two separate centers or combined. If located in the central towers building, the need for parking generated by these uses is also a concern. Others suggested a location at a reconstructed Lakeview House in Front Park. Overall, the need for multiple information centers to serve different locations, types of attractions, and user groups was recognized.

#### *Community Connections*

The Richardson Olmsted Complex is located amidst several commercial districts; Elmwood Avenue, Grant/Ferry, and Grant/Amherst. Members of the public would like to ensure that the Architecture and Visitor Center, hotel, and conference space, direct visitors to surrounding commercial districts and cultural institutions. The community hopes that the Architecture and Visitor Center does not duplicate existing nearby cultural offerings *or other visitor centers in the region*. In response to this, the proposed hotel will not be a full service hotel, and the Architecture and Visitors Center will not duplicate assets of surrounding cultural institutions. In fact, hoteliers feel the connections to surrounding businesses and cultural institutions are amenities that will make a hotel at the Richardson Complex more successful. The Master Plan team has also proposed physical connections to surrounding streets by way of pathways and drives. *The Buffalo Niagara Convention and Visitors Bureau will develop the visitor center at the Richardson Olmsted Complex.*

#### *Additions to the Buildings*

The RCC and consultant team is considering an addition to the tower building on its north side that would be an entrance to the Architecture and Visitor Center, and shared space with the boutique hotel and conference center. Some members of the community are concerned that initial concepts are not compatible with the historic nature of the buildings. It should be noted that standards for historic

rehabilitation suggest that new, non-historic additions to historic buildings be designed to be differentiated from historic elements.

The community would like to ensure that if a new addition is constructed, efforts are made to allow people to experience the southern historic entrance as well. Residents in the neighborhoods south of the Complex would like the southern entrance to be functional.

#### *Continuing to Address Community Aspirations*

As planning continues, the community would like planning for the Architecture and Visitor Center to address the goals and objectives that are part of the Community Vision. The Architecture and Visitor Center should help improve neighborhood quality of life, and promote public accessibility, historic rehabilitation, and economic development in surrounding neighborhoods and the region.

### **B. The Community Vision and the Final Master Plan**

The exploration of broad community issues led to the formulation of goals and more specific objectives to meet those goals, as described in the Community Vision report. These goals are considered important by the Community Advisory Group, its constituents, and the broader public. This report includes an assessment of how well the Final Master Plan addresses the goals and objectives of the Community Vision. The complete list of goals and objectives can be found in the Community Vision report.

#### **Goal: Benefit the people living in adjacent neighborhoods.**

Vacant structures can be havens for crime, can signal disinvestment in a community, and can reduce morale of people that live around them. The rehabilitation and reuse of the complex and grounds can have many positive impacts on people living around it. The rehabilitation and reuse proposals in the Draft Master Plan can address these quality of life issues.

#### *Public Feedback*

- Members of the public feel that it is unclear how the Master Plan can best address improvements in the surrounding neighborhoods. The community recognizes that there will likely be positive impacts from the rehabilitation of the Richardson Olmsted Complex, including increased neighborhood property values. There is some concern that increased property values in surrounding neighborhoods may lead to the displacement of current residents. The public hopes that efforts to avoid this are collaborative, and include city officials, community organizations, and community residents.
- *Potential negative impacts of a rehabilitated complex on the quality of life in surrounding communities should be mitigated, including increased noise and traffic.*

- *Neighborhood safety and security are concerns of residents in surrounding communities. The community would like the Master Plan and its implementation to help address these concerns.*

**Goal: Help revitalize and complement the surrounding community.**

Public investment can be used to leverage and generate additional private investment. An investment in the rehabilitation and reuse of the Richardson Olmsted Complex can aid the revitalization of distressed business districts and surrounding neighborhoods. The Draft Master Plan describes a series of potential uses that will attract people to the complex and potentially the surrounding community.

*Public Feedback*

- The public would like the Master Plan to ensure that people visiting the complex will not be segregated from surrounding communities, especially the commercial districts and cultural institutions.
- Some members of the community feel that the Master Plan may need to more directly address the physical conditions of the surrounding community, including its neighborhoods and business districts. The RCC can work with the City to address code enforcements to surrounding properties and improvements to public infrastructure adjacent to the complex.

The Roycroft Campus, an arts and crafts community in East Aurora, may provide a useful model of integrating the complex with the surrounding neighborhoods.

- Some comments call for increased collaboration among the ROC, Buffalo State College, and the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy inviting, for example, the creation of an urban horticultural program. *Continued deliberations, including a charrette with residents and other stakeholders in surrounding communities, can help address neighborhood concerns.*
- *The Master Plan may have a greater local economic impact if local contractors, firms, and employees are hired to help implement the plan.*

**Goal: Allow the site to be publicly accessible.**

Public accessibility is a broadly held aspiration of members of the CAG and the public. Allowing public access to both the buildings and the grounds can help achieve several of the other Community Vision goals, including; benefit the people living in adjacent neighborhoods, help revitalize and complement the surrounding community, and gain broad community acceptance of the Master Plan.

### *Public Feedback*

- Members of the public suggest that proposed uses of buildings should not prevent public access to them. The Architecture and Visitor Center, as a publicly accessible space, can help address these concerns. The Master Plan may also address how other building uses will allow for public gathering spaces.
- The public would like the grounds to be accessible as park-like space with different types of pathways connecting to the surrounding community. The roadways through the Complex can allow for continuous circulation loops.
- *The complex can be connected to the Olmsted park system at Delaware Park and the adjacent Olmsted parkways.*
- When asked at the January 27, 2009 public meeting, the public preferred the Landscape Circuits proposal for rehabilitating the landscape because, among other reasons, it created more open connections to the surrounding community.
- *The public supports a logical physical connection between the ROC and Buffalo State College.*

### **Goal: Provide a framework for rehabilitating the historic Richardson Olmsted Complex.**

The plan prioritizes building stabilization to prevent further deterioration and recommends rehabilitating the buildings to be ready for different types of uses to occupy the space. The Draft Master Plan also proposes rehabilitation of the landscape based upon the Cultural Landscape Report character defining Olmstedian features and recommendations.

### *Public Feedback*

- The public is pleased that the Draft Master Plan aims to rehabilitate the historic buildings and landscape of the Richardson Olmsted Complex. The public also recognizes that in some cases, interpretation of the landscape is necessary.
- There is concern that the demand for parking will overshadow the aspirations for landscape rehabilitation. Alternatives to surface parking should be included; the Draft Master Plan proposes dispersed small lots and on street parking.
- The majority of the public at the January 27, 2009 public meeting preferred the Landscape Circuits proposal for rehabilitating the landscape. Reasons such as it seemed more “Olmstedian” and had less surface parking near buildings were stated. One audience member thought the entrances from Forest Ave. in the Landscape Courts proposal may be more historically accurate.

- *The rehabilitation of the south and west lawns is a high priority for community members and organizations, including the BOPC. This important first step would re-establish the serenity of the site and its setting and greatly enhance public views of the historic Richardson Olmsted Complex.*
- The community feels that sustainability can be addressed in the Master Plan. This can include green design principles in building rehabilitation that can save energy costs and landscape treatments, such as native plantings and water features that can aid stormwater management. *The Master Plan can also promote alternative modes of transportation, including walking and biking.*
- The community feels that a landholding strategy on the northern portion of grounds may be acceptable if new structures on the northern lands complement and enhance the historic buildings and landscape. Future development on the northern lands should not be ruled out but guidelines should be developed that are aligned with the community's goals. Some community members are concerned that the development value of the northern lands is not as great as the value of what would be lost, including the open space and views. Several CAG members suggested that the northern area at the location of the existing maintenance buildings should be the location for potential new development and the area at Rees and Rockwell should remain open space. However, more information is needed regarding the landholding strategy for the community to better judge its impacts.

**Goal: Better integrate the Buffalo Psychiatric Center with the Richardson Olmsted Complex.**

The Buffalo Psychiatric Center is an important part of the history and the future of the Richardson Olmsted Complex. The RCC and Master Plan team recognize the difficulty in fulfilling the aspirations for public accessibility while balancing the patient need for privacy and integration.

*Public Feedback:*

- The public would like connections to the Psychiatric Center to be physical and programmatic. These connections, as part of a rehabilitated complex, can improve the quality of life of patients. Many members of the community requested more concrete proposals for how these connections can be made. Potential programs can be related to art, music, or gardening, for example, and can integrate Psychiatric Center recipients with other members of the public. *The grounds can be designed to be conducive to the treatment of mental health.*
- Reconfigured parking for the Buffalo Psychiatric Center needs additional planning to be sure that it addresses the Psychiatric Center's needs.
- Community members also called for respecting the history of the treatment of mental health, possibly through an interpretative program. This can help reduce the stigma of mental health treatment.

**Goal: Gain broad community acceptance of the Master Plan.**

The Master Plan will be most successful with broad community support. The CAG, public meetings, and other public input opportunities aim to gain broad acceptance of the Master Plan. The thorough community engagement process has ensured that the public has a forum for dialogue that addresses their aspirations. *As a testament to this, the public meetings have been consistently well attended: August 12, 2008 - @160 people, January 27, 2009 - @240 people, and July 14, 2009 - @145 people.*

*Public Feedback:*

- Several community members at the January 27, 2009 and July 14, 2009 public meetings expressed appreciation for all of the opportunities for public involvement in the Master Plan.
- The public feels that it is important to plan with the organizations and community types represented by the CAG as the Master Plan progresses and as implementation begins. This includes Buffalo State College as it embarks on a campus master plan, and the Buffalo Psychiatric Center.
- The RCC and the Master Plan team can continue efforts to engage a more regional audience, given the regional importance of this plan.
- In addition to these comments from the general public, the CAG would like the RCC to address what the CAG's role will be after the Master Plan is complete, and what additional public engagement opportunities will be provided during implementation.
- *The public would like more information regarding the environmental review of the Master Plan and how the community can continue to be involved in the next phases of implementation.*

**Goal: Implement the Master Plan!**

The community is weary of planning work in the region that is not implemented.

*Public Feedback*

- It is important that time frames, priorities, and costs set by the Master Plan are realistic and achievable.
- *Some members of the community are concerned that existing public funds for implementing the Master Plan may not be sufficient in the long term. Additional funding sources for implementing the Master Plan and maintaining the rehabilitated complex can be sought.*
- The Master Plan needs to be flexible. It will be more implementable if it allows for changes over time.