

Union Terrace Gardens: An Address to Aberdeen City Council

In the interests of democracy, transparency and direct public consultation with the people of Aberdeen, I am asking This Council to vote against any and all motions before it today which would prematurely progress the so-called 'City Gardens Project'. I request that you at least postpone your votes until the following basic conditions are met:

- a. the Public Referendum has taken place AND the majority of the public support the granite web;
- b. the May City Council elections have taken place; and
- c. sufficient time has passed for the public and city councillors to properly consider the PriceWaterhouse Coopers report's contents, noting it was paid for by pro-City Garden Projects entities.

PriceWaterhouse Coopers claims this granite web will create more permanent jobs than the Olympic Games will create in London –we are being asked to swallow this without sufficient time to question it.

Before any further progress or expenditure on the City Gardens Project continues, I also ask that the Council arranges for the following to be created and/or sourced and published for public consideration (to display transparency and openness):

- a report on legal protection accorded to Common Good Land and acknowledgement of the fact that Union Terrace Gardens is Common Good Land;
- detailed costings for the newly-chosen project design to be implemented, taking account of the environmental factors such as the Den Burn which flows under the gardens;
- full architectural drawings (showing air vents, parking, walkway supports and so on – currently not in the drawings) be issued showing accurate scale;
- an environmental impact assessment be made and a schedule drawn up of the garden's listed and unlisted trees, wildlife (such as bats, rooks, the peregrine falcons and red kites at Triple Kirks which hunt in the gardens, etc) and historical monuments (for example the Mary Slessor memorial).

Only with this basic information and time to digest it properly can any citizen or councillor make an informed decision as to whether or not this proposed project is affordable, desirable, or beneficial. We are being asked to borrow – not 'unlock', but 'borrow' at least £70 million, at a rate of interest not currently specified. It is little wonder the Youth Council oppose the plans: they are likely to be left with a legacy of debt.

I use the word 'project' with reservations. A project needs to have a defined, precise scope, a detailed time scale, and accurate costings. Without any one of these elements there is no project. With all three items unclear, no responsible councillor can vote in favour of the measures before them today. To commit any money to the project before having the project defined negates the principles which should protect the public purse.

Fiscal prudence dictates putting this vote aside for a mere four months until the referendum is concluded. According to the Evening Express, Valerie Watts said "whether or not we have a big new infrastructure project in the gardens will be determined as a result of further discussions in the Council I'm aware that it's the councillors that take key decisions about what happens within the City for the Citizens'. I would like to remind Ms Watts that in that same edition of the paper, Alex Neil, Infrastructure Secretary confirmed that he will only allow Aberdeen to borrow the necessary

funds via TIF if the public say yes in the Referendum. Taking account of Alex Neil's position – voting to put another penny on this project before the Referendum is unacceptable. This scheme is not time sensitive. In fact, quite the contrary: if TIF should be granted, then no other TIF funding would be possible for 25 years. We need to have the referendum, have a new council, and watch the current test-case TIF projects and then evaluate if this is a sensible plan and if TIF is the mechanism for it. The current rush to action is contrary to public feeling and common sense. Variants of a garden scheme have been voted down in the past, and the only sound democratic thing to do is to stop this illogical rush ahead, and wait for the referendum. To commit any money such as the £300,000 demanded today for the so-called project in advance of the referendum negates any democracy, transparency or consultation. And many consider it an affront to those whose schools are shutting and services are being cut.

There have been too many recent surprises to make any decision now. First, the design which the public cast the most votes for was the glass greenhouse. Actually, the public should have had a chance to vote to retain the gardens when the exhibition of finalists was on. Councillors including those on the Monitoring Group asked this to be an option, but per the minutes, Gerry Brough said it would not be. It certainly could have been an option, but leaving that aside, the public voted for the greenhouse. It was a surprise to learn this had been rejected in favour of the granite web.

It is a great surprise to learn that this project, apparently to be funded to the tune of £50 million from Sir Ian Wood must have £300,000 from the Aberdeen City Taxpayer to progress legal aspects. This is certainly contrary to previous promises that Aberdeen City Council would not pay for any part of this project. Indeed, some of its members objected to funding the referendum on those grounds. We shall see if these same members object to the £300,000 requested of it today. Councillors will be aware that as of May 2011 some £422,000 of taxpayer money has been spent on consultants and public relations campaigns for this project. Let's hold off further expenditure until after the Referendum. Why on earth would you not want to wait?

It is a surprise that we are entertaining a £5 million pound donation from an anonymous donor. Does this person or company have a vested interest in the web being built? Transparency dictates that we know who this mystery donor is.

It is a surprise to learn that the question of common good land is deliberately not being presented to this chamber. This seems to be again at Gerry Brough's decision. Let me be the one to tell this Council for the record it does not own Union Terrace Gardens. This green park is the property of all of the citizens of Aberdeen by virtue of its undoubted status as COMMON GOOD LAND.

Do you really think that building concrete ramps and adding yet another performance area will make Aberdeen a more desirable place for people to live in for the people who are here now, and for any incomers? No shred of evidence has been offered because it does not exist and these plans do not work. What if the money, time and resources expended on the City Gardens Project and its related companies had been directed towards education and services?

The drawings do not add up scale wise, and the basic ideas lack safety commonsense. As someone with a BA in Fine art and a Masters of Fine Arts from Edinburgh College of art, I read so-called 'reports' favouring this project which are peppered with subjective words such as 'attractive' and 'iconic' and like the architect Gonzales, I can find no justification for their use.

We are shown walkways – but there are no means of support shown. Either they are to be placed on supports which will eat up further green space, or they are magically suspended. No one has yet explained to the public how these sloping ramps up and down will make life easier for anyone with

mobility problems, families with prams, and so on. Since we have a city that cannot keep its pavements free from ice and snow at the best of times, how will these walkways be kept useable – which entities are going to pay for maintenance, safety? And who exactly is going to stop people from throwing things off these ramps or god forbid jumping? Either they are enclosed and then become a policing and safety nightmare – or they are ramps you can fall from. Perhaps some of the privileged members of pro-City Garden Project companies have been told –but the public certainly has not. It is also time to dispel the myth the gardens are dangerous – the Grampian Police statistics show the gardens are safer than surrounding streets.

One drawing shows a performance area of some kind with a stage that is on the same level as the audience. Having worked in the music industry, I doubt any touring band would be able to afford the necessary security to stop ground level fans charging a stage. In today's environmentally-aware age, it may prove very difficult to find any acts willing to perform in an area created against the locals' wishes over an existing ecosystem.

The park can either be a green space with its existing listed and important trees, or it can have a space for events: It cannot have both. Then there is the question of charging money for events: this is common good land, and every citizen should be able to wander any part of it freely without having to buy a ticket, a coffee or explain themselves. There is no way Aberdonians are going to surrender this basic freedom.

Returning to the question of this theatre/exhibition space. As taxpayers, we are already supporting the Lemon Tree for small events. We are heavily subsidising the Aberdeen Exhibition and Conference Centre – because it cannot turn sufficient profit on its own without taxpayer help. It is economically illogical to be borrowing money to ruin a park to create a space which will remove business away from venues we are already propping up. Where is the (former it seems) Scottish Enterprise policy of not creating a business which would compete with existing businesses? And, ladies and gentlemen, and councillors: Where is the necessary parking for this venue and proposed shops and offices?

If the parking is to be below ground, then the architectural drawings need to be re-done (which they should be anyway) to show the entrances, exits, air shafts, ventilation systems, etc This granite web is a perfect example of something that can be drawn, but which cannot be feasibly engineered to look like the drawings do.

But do the citizens want it to be engineered at all? The answer comes after the referendum – and the repercussions come at May's ballot box. I am not alone in predicting a resounding rejection of this scheme and those who would force it upon us.

With that I remind you of the environmental factors – we have agreed with the EU to reduce carbon emissions, retain more green fields, protect species such as the bats that inhabit the garden's listed trees, and care for Peregrines and the rooks. You might think – clearly some of you do – that the environmental questions are unimportant in the face of your plans. I and many others think that your plans are unimportant in the face of our environmental heritage and rights to clean air, biodiversity and free, open, public green space.

I chose to move here 8 years ago because it was a small jewel of a city with beautiful architectural features which existed along with nature and wildlife, not to be found together in such a setting anywhere else in the world. These are the things that attracted me and other incomers. Sorry, but ramps over a former garden would not have impressed. Yet a few people in positions of power are

determined to make the wildlife give way for construction projects of dubious merit. Yes, I was not born here, but I would like to close by quoting someone who was:-

“Aberdeen was my home town. I was born there, and lived in the city until I was seventeen. For me, Union Terrace Gardens was, and still is the green historical heart of the city. Like so many towns and cities all over the country, Aberdeen lost a great deal of its architectural heritage and charm through destruction by bulldozer and concrete. It made me sad then, and it still makes me sad. I hoped that this kind of “vandalism” had peaked in the 60’s and 70’s, but for Aberdeen, it seems to be back with vengeance. What idiocy and madness. I’ve been based in London since 1971, so I guess that kind of counts my voice out. But, to the citizens of Aberdeen I would say this... “Aberdeen is your home town. Are you going to sit back, and do nothing while it’s beautiful historic centre gets ripped out and concreted over”??!! It’s down to you to stop this happening.”

And that is what Annie Lennox who knows a thing or two about culture, heritage, the arts, Aberdeen and the world’s great cities wrote about building in these beautiful, useful, environmentally crucial gardens wrote. If you need ramps for god knows what reason, then put them on brownfield city centre land – we do have many empty spaces needing regeneration. These gardens need tlc not teletubbie architecture.

In conclusion I repeat to take any action moving this impossible, undesirable scheme forward before a referendum and before May elections undermines any ‘transparency’ ‘democracy’ ‘inclusion’ or ‘consultation’ you have previously claimed exists. Do not go ahead. And when you get your ballot, VOTE RETAIN. It is SIMPLES.

