

Memo

To: Honorable Mayor and Fellow Aldermen
From: Alderman Steve Podrygula
Subject: City Hall Retaining Wall
Date: 08/13/2019

Following our consideration of this issue – item 8.8 on the agenda for the August 5 meeting – I had some further questions regarding the matter. Given the lateness of the hour and not wanting to take the time of the entire Council, I ended up calling the consulting KLJ structural engineer – Cassie McNames, PE, on August 7 – to try to get some of my concerns resolved.

I feel that the information Cassie provided gives a better perspective on the situation and is something that the Council, and the public, should be aware of, hence, this memo. While I don't know that the additional information would have affected our votes, as a courtesy to Alderman Wolsky (who was very concerned about the issue), I would be willing to make a motion to have our action formally reconsidered. Our two attorneys have advised me that this would be indeed in order, at our next regular meeting, on August 19. On the other hand, it may just be as easy to put it on the agenda as an informational item for some further discussion.

Here are the key points of what I learned from the structural engineer:

1. Although the city committee that studied the issue was referred to as the “aesthetics committee”, Ms. McNames assured me that the group examined the entire situation very carefully and looked at numerous considerations (e.g., police parking is currently inadequate and more space would be needed, even if City Hall were to eventually move) and options. There hadn't been adequate time, on Monday evening, to fully go over what the committee had considered and the reasoning behind their recommendations.
2. The estimated cost of the project has gone up for a variety of reasons, particularly the length of time since the original plans were made and marked increases in the cost of steel. Just removing the current rock face – which would be necessary no matter what else might be done – would cost approximately \$3 million.
3. Currently, “the soil is somewhat stable... (and) the slope itself would be considered stable”, but measurements are approaching the point of concern (in terms of safety), and it is likely that there will be deterioration as time goes on. In fact, there could have been deterioration from when the preliminary engineering report was completed, in 2016.
4. She assured me that the committee did review alternatives to a wall. If the current rock wall were removed and the slope simply stabilized (e.g., by some sort of protective mat and/or vegetation), it might be cheaper, but the expected lifespan of that improvement would only be 5 to 10 years. In contrast, after 25 to 30 years, a retaining wall would pay for itself.

5. Using a non-wall option would require using an outside contractor – who would need to bring in their own crews and equipment – which would be quite expensive. It's not simply a matter of having an out-of-state contractor just teaming up with a local one and/or supervising their work.

6. A gradual grass slope is simply not feasible. While a steep grassy slope could replace the current structure, that would entail other challenges. For example, drainage would be a significant issue (e.g., diverting water at the top of the hill and providing for adequate drainage of the slope), and there would still not be enough space to store snow. The site is a challenging one and a more careful engineering study would be required in terms of the drainage issue alone. Even with a grass slope, a wall at the base of the hill might still be necessary. She stated that her firm's soil engineers just have not had good luck with steep natural grass slopes.

7. Although there had been some consideration of a steep grass slope by the committee, they "just didn't feel that was a viable option" (although she was not sure exactly why they reached this conclusion). At the very least, some soil would have to be replaced (e.g., even now, after a rainstorm, water runoff is a problem and soil washes down the slope). Stabilization of the slope might be necessary, and ongoing maintenance would be an issue (even if the grass didn't need to be mowed).

8. Detailed consideration of a steep grass slope was not done, and would require a careful engineering study (e.g., to determine feasibility and potential costs). This could likely be accomplished within a couple of months; I forgot to ask how much it might cost. If such a study were to be done, "it would be tight" in terms of getting the engineering work done in time to get the project out for bids in January (which is the current goal).

To summarize, my follow-up conversation with the structural engineer provided a broader and clearer perspective on the situation. From my point of view, it supports the decision that the Council made. On the other hand, some Council members might feel differently and be interested in going that last step, of directing an engineering study to specifically focus on the option of a steep grass slope (which appears the only other feasible potential alternative).

SP/d