

Citizens Voice DURANGO

Have a Voice in the Future of Durango's Downtown!

Petition for a Public Process for Siting Protective Service Facilities

By late June 2021, the Durango Fire Protection District (DFPD) had emerged as the buyer of Durango's historic old High School site for a newly proposed "Emergency Services Center." Citizens Voice Durango recognizes the long-standing need for a new state-of-the-art facility for this vital service to our community and fully supports the City of Durango (City) assisting DFPD in finding a new home for the downtown fire station.

The process among three publicly-funded entities, however, has been flawed from the beginning. Early in the sale by Durango School District 9R to the DFPD, Durango City Council said it could not get involved as it was not a party to the contract and had not seen any development plan. The DFPD, more recently admitting secrecy, did not talk to the City of Durango until it asked them on August 31, 2021 to co-locate its Police Department (PD) with the DFPD.

By design, the plan was withheld until after the purchase and, by circumstance, the Durango community has not been asked about its "best interests," an early stipulation in the 9R-DFPD contract. The voice of our community is being stifled.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Who are we?

Citizens Voice Durango is a group of concerned citizens and local business owners (see p.6) who believe that collaboration and communication among publicly-funded government entities and its citizens is vital and will lead to a more livable and vibrant community.

Citizens Voice's mission is to facilitate open collaborative communication between the City of Durango, the Durango Fire Protection District and Durango's citizens and business owners to achieve the best possible outcomes that support a vibrant downtown and appropriately sited new state-of-the-art facilities for the DFPD and PD.

While we strongly support protective services (fire and police), we believe a public process is critical to such an important decision that would affect the future of Durango's downtown, our community and economy for years to come. No data has been presented to date supporting this move, including the most critical criterion – response time. When asked in the latest public presentation by DFPD if the new location would equal or improve the response time, the question was ignored.



For the public's health and safety, among other social, economic and community interests, we do believe that the old High School site is NOT an appropriate site for a fire and police station, nor in the best interest of the DFPD or the economic and social vitality, public safety and welfare of our community. Additionally, the cost to relocate the PD to the old high school is the only criteria the city is currently analyzing instead of starting by asking what the PD really needs in a new facility. DFPD has stated the initial cost to the city would be about \$10 million for a building they would not own, nor may not meet their needs.

What are we for?

We want a public process to discuss siting and a location for protective services – fire and police – in the downtown Central Business District. We are seeking the same public hearing process to which all other projects proposing major land-use changes would be subject. We want this to be public and to enable a:

- new state-of-the-art facilities for both the Fire District and Police Department;
- vital downtown Durango;
- long-term vision for downtown Durango;
- well-planned land use decisions for protective services, and all community services and businesses, in the Central Business District.

What's the background sequence of events leading to this Initiative?

The decision to propose the old High School building as a downtown fire station site was decided in early to mid 2021 by two taxpayer-funded government entities, the Durango School District 9R (School District) School Board and the Durango Fire Protection District (DFPD).

These two boards chose to keep their decision to select the old High School property for a new downtown fire station secret from, and not inform, the City of Durango until the sale was announced in late June 2021, and said the proposed sale contract was confidential until the sale was completed in December 2021.

Citizens began objecting to the proposed use as inappropriate for that site beginning in August 2021, and called for a “public forum” in person at city council meetings and via a [Change.org petition](#) signed by over 1,000 citizens and presented to City Council on February 2, 2022.

The School District and DFPD both announced and held their own versions of a “public forum,” the former in December 2021 days before the sale of the property closed, while the latter held its “forum” in March 2022. In both instances, questions from the citizens were required to be submitted beforehand, only certain questions were selected by the two districts, the answers to questions were prepared beforehand, little (9R) or no (DFPD) public comment was allowed at the “forum,” and no follow-up or clarifying questions were allowed with respect to the “official” answers provided. In other words, there was no dialogue, nor exchange of ideas, nor any discussion allowed of critical issues - these were not legitimate public forums.

To date, the City Council has only said that the public will have its say at some point in time. That time would be after the development plan is submitted, during a Planning Commission meeting with no guarantee of more than 3-minutes of public comment per person. This is not how Durango does business. We have a great history of public engagement that has made our community what it is – and should continue.

What is this process we are undertaking?

This is an Initiative process, where the citizens initiate and advance a proposed ordinance as an amendment to the City Code of Ordinances. It is not a Referendum such that the City Council would initiate. The informal citizens group advancing this is Citizens Voice Durango. Once the sufficient number of signatures is achieved via the petition process, City Council will then have to decide to 1) implement the ordinance as written; or 2) put the ordinance to a vote of the people. The latter would cost taxpayers approximately \$38,000 and be held during a special election in early August 2022.

What does our Initiative propose?

Our proposal amends the City's Code (Zoning Ordinance) by making Protective Services - fire and police - facilities - a "C" Conditional Use which requires public hearings to determine the appropriateness of such uses in the location proposed within the Central Business District Zone. These legally notified public hearings, to be held by the Planning Commission, will provide the public the opportunity to comment on the proposed use, like any other proposal from a developer for such a major change in land use, something that to date we have been denied.

The current Code language classifies fire and police facilities as "A" Allowed Uses city-wide which do not require public hearings to establish the proposed use. This Initiative establishes the public hearing requirement for the Central Business District only. The Allowed Use designation would remain in effect for the rest of the city.

Our Initiative also calls for any fire and police facilities in the Central Business Zone District to conform with all adopted City planning documents including the City's Strategic Plan, Comprehensive Plan, the Urban Renewal Authority Midtown Plan, the Multi-Modal Plan, and Downtown Development plans, which name redevelopment of the former 9R Admin. building (old high school) as key to economic development downtown and support all other quality of life goals that are the foundation of our community and economy.

Why are we proposing this Initiative?

This Initiative is being advanced now to afford the public the opportunity to comment on this proposed major land use change in public hearing because the proposed change of use from a school property into an Industrial Use (a multiple vehicle garage with living quarters above the garage to house employees on duty) in Durango's historic downtown will pose significant adverse impacts and are contrary to Durango's plans to protect the character, vitality, and quality of life of the Central Business District.

There would also be significant impacts to Buckley Park, our "Central Park" and community gathering space, as well as the adjacent Smiley Building, host to 70 tenants, kids and families use of the building, and area businesses and residences from loss of parking, congestion, among other impacts outlined below. There is also no guarantee that the response time would equal or improve in this new location adversely affecting the public health, safety and welfare of our community.

What's the simplest reason to support this Initiative?

To date, there has been no process or opportunity afforded Durango citizens to meaningfully participate in a public forum where there is dialogue and an exchange of ideas and opinions about this proposal or the broader issue of what we want for Durango's downtown at a critical time in its growth and development. This Initiative mandates that protective services must seek a conditional use permit that requires there be a public forum, achieved through public hearings, before any proposed Emergency Services Center or protective service facility can be approved (or denied).

Why is the proposed use of the old Old High School property for a fire station (and potential Police Station) problematic and River City Hall (RCH) preferable?

There are multiple things to consider:

- The emergency response time for an emergency vehicle from the proposed 12th St site is still unknown, but it is unlikely to be better than the response time from the existing fire station on Camino del Rio, an arterial street, and possibly worse;
- The existing location of the downtown fire station on Camino del Rio can accommodate a new modern state-of-the-art fire station, and its direct access onto an arterial street provides the best available response times for emergency services.
- The Durango City Council informed the Fire District in January 2022 that it was open to discussing how a new fire station can be constructed at this RCH site, and the Fire Chief stated in a late January 2022 memo to the City Manager that, while he preferred the fire station to be built at the old High School site that he had already purchased, the RCH site would be his preferred #1 alternative to the currently proposed site.
- The immediate area around three sides of the site already experiences traffic congestion, which will only be exacerbated by traffic from fire trucks, ambulances, police cars, and employee vehicles, in addition to Main Avenue and other neighborhood traffic;
- The E 13th St and E 2nd Avenue accesses into the old high school property are moderately steep to steep and known to be hazardous in severe winter conditions;
- The ambiance and activities of Buckley Park, the community's true "village green," will be severely diminished and/or impaired by the constant flow of traffic around the Park on Main Ave, 12th St, 13th St, and E Second Avenue;
- The Fire District's draft plans show the proposed removal of existing on-street diagonal parking along 12th St because their overall plan will not work for their big fire trucks to maneuver through the angle parking areas; either Buckley Park will lose currently accessible parking abutting the park, or all the businesses along 12th St will lose parking essential to their businesses, or both sides could lose all their parking spaces;
- The proposed fire station location will have detrimental, if not severely damaging, impacts on the historic character of the old High School building, as well as the adjoining East Third Avenue "Boulevard" Historic District;
- The location of a fire station at the old high school location will have detrimental effects on pedestrian and bicycle usage in the immediate vicinity of the property, limiting E 2nd Ave connectivity through the site, as the city's Multimodal plan calls for;

- A fire station at this location will negatively impact the tenants, community (families and kids) and economic activity in The Smiley Building, and our downtown business district, as well as dismiss long-developed plans to use the old high school for economic activity;
- The creation of an industrial-sized garage at this location will generate substantial, if not excessive, noise and fumes; and
- The construction of a new fire station at this site will eliminate existing mature trees in front of the proposed fire station, and the entire site will require a substantial, if not excessive, amount of paved surface.

Has the Fire District (DFPD) proposed the old High School for an Emergency Services Hub?

Yes, the DFPD has advanced and currently still hopes to house not just a new fire station on the property but also the central administration Fire Headquarters relocating from BODO park, along with the entire City Police Department, ambulance services, and possibly emergency dispatch services. The term “Emergency Services Hub” does not yet have an officially adopted definition, and its viability appears to be contingent upon the Police Department locating there. The Fire Chief announced at his March 10, 2022 “Public Forum” that the City would be a partner in locating in the Hub, a statement disavowed by the City the next day [in a document publicly released](#) which emphasized that the City had not as yet made any commitment to relocate its Police Department into the “Hub,” nor had it committed any public funds (~\$10 Million).

What is the Historic Preservation status of the old High School property?

The 9R Administration/Old High School property is NOT listed on any local Historic preservation register. It IS listed on the National Register of Historic Places, but that listing provides NO protection of any kind to the building. The building is protected through the State of Colorado with historic preservation covenants but ONLY through May 2024. There are no guarantees the building will be preserved thereafter.

So what might be a good solution to resolving this problem?

First, working together with the public, our elected officials should conduct a robust and engaged public discussion of what is best for Durango’s downtown, our community and economy, as well as our public health and safety. With \$3 million in taxpayer funds already committed to this building purchase (rather than to the actual construction of a new fire station as stipulated in the 2014 City-DFPD contract) and another \$10 million requested for a building it will not own, we should be discussing what is the most cost-effective solution for siting new downtown fire and police stations that truly protect the public’s health, safety and welfare and best supports our community and economy.

This could include a timely and sincere effort by the City Council to consider the sale, lease or trade of River City Hall (RCH) to the Fire District, and to consider demolishing RCH structures, possibly in a phased demolition, to allow for a new fire station, and possibly a combined police station, on the RCH site.

Our elected officials and city administrators would then enter into discussions and deliberations, again, through a legitimate public process, as to what the highest and best use of the old High School might be. In at least two city plans (Strategic and Midtown Urban Renewal

Authority), the old high school is identified as a tax-increment finance-generating property and mixed-use development the City would work with a developer to achieve. These plans are current. If the goals have changed, we need to know why. If not, and the DFPD is offered the RCH property, the City could assist the DFPD with the disposition of the old High School to support the recommendations of the City's adopted plans, perhaps serving as intermediary owner on a temporary basis. All this could be a good initial, and possibly ultimate, solution.

Who else is concerned about the DFPD's proposal to occupy the old High School buildings?

The Durango Business Improvement District (BID) and Local First are two of Durango's important economic development organizations. Both entities have communicated concerns to City Council about the new fire station being built on the old High School property, and BID has requested a public discussion before development plans are submitted. Both entities support seeking public input through an open and legitimate public process.

There are also many business and property owners who have expressed their concerns, including the owners and tenants in The Smiley Building, which is home to 70 small businesses, nonprofits and entrepreneurs.

Many local businesses are also concerned about the proposed relocation, including: Durango Cyclery, local law offices, multiple business owners in the Victorian and Stonehouse buildings, and the Catacombs Fitness Center at 12th and Main. Other community businesses have expressed support for an open public process including Bread, the Eye Dr. and the Velvet Monkey. To date, the DFPD has only outreached the 3rd Avenue Boulevard Association. Other residents and business owners deserve a voice, too.

When do we need your help?

The petitions will be circulated until Wednesday, April 27, 2022 at 3pm. Please sign by this date!

Contact Us at: citizensvoicedurango.org and contact@citizensvoicedurango.org

Citizens Voice Durango Organizing Committee:

Greg Hoch, Robin Wiles, Ted Wright, Ellen Stein, Thomas Egolf, Joe Hanrahan, Sheryl Lock, Jenny Hill, Ken Francis, Holly Jobson, Mary Oswald, Charles Shaw, Lisa Shaw, Gary Schroeder, Sarah Shaw, Kent Ford, John Mahoney, Bill Carver, Peter Schertz, R. Michael Bell, Maggie Bowes, Lisa Marie Glass, Kendra Quan, Dallas Belden, Jim Shadell, Micki Rhodes, Linda Geer, Glenna Sexton, and Karen Pontius - all of the above people are circulating petitions.

Other residents that have been involved in and/or support efforts to bring a public process to the siting of protective services include: Tim Wheeler, Lars Hansen, Michael Wanger, Salye Stein, Fred Grimes, Bobbie Carll, Holly Duckworth, Julie Meadows, Steven Gawlik, Audrey Royem, Jim Sims, Michael Hoffman, Kathleen McCaddon, Tracy Henderson, Ed Horvat, Dyan Craft, Mike Desatnick, Margy and Henry Dudley, Wendy Barney, Kathleen Shadell, Katherine Reynolds, Julie Meadows, Tracie Holcomb, Karen McManus, and George Schmidt.