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Plaza plan improves

Fewer homes would be taken, and visual buffers are added

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The design keeps improving for the Customs and Immigration plaza that will eventually anchor this side of a new Peace Bridge. The reason for that is communication and action.

Bridge officials are paying attention to criticisms of plaza proposals and making changes where they can. The result, we suspect, will be a project that makes several welcome improvements to the existing landscape — a net addition to the neighborhood and the city.

Recent changes were prompted by discussions between the Peace Bridge Authority and the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy, which wants to see Front Park restored as part of the project. As a result of those discussions, the authority revised the plan, which removes traffic from Front Park while returning three acres to the space designed by Frederick Law Olmsted.

It also lowered a highway ramp below grade and added berms and trees, reduced the size of a parking garage, dropped plans for a visitors center and reduced the amount of land and the number of homes that would be taken for the project. The net result is that there will be more visual buffering between neighborhoods and the bridge plaza.

While one group of homes would be spared, another — with more than 80 structures — still would be taken. The impact on that neighborhood and the residents who want to stay there should not be minimized — but the impact on the city of an inadequate crossing would be worse.

Ruled out was a request to cover a stretch of I-190, the Niagara Thruway, to connect Front Park to the waterfront — mainly because that task, as desirable as it is, belongs to the Thruway Authority, not the Peace Bridge Authority. The authority also said a proposal to cover the place with decking would likely run into objections from the Department of Homeland Security. It should.

Nevertheless, the authority has responded seriously to these objections, a point that even the conservancy makes. “It’s well beyond tweaking,” said David J. Colligan, a Buffalo lawyer and conservancy trustee. “It’s encouraging to us.”

So it should be to everyone who wants to see this project not just completed, but completed well. These changes are

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useful and well considered, and they bring the date of construction that much closer.

In the end, the new plaza and the new bridge will be here for a 100 years. While other interests have been taken into consideration, the final judgment should rest — for both the bridge and the plaza — on what will be best for this region over the course of that century.

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