

MOTION
(LYING OVER)
NO. M-21-366

CITY HALL: October 7, 2021

BY: COUNCILMEMBER GISLESON PALMER

SECONDED BY:

WHEREAS, The area now known as Congo Square, located in the historic Tremé neighborhood of New Orleans, emerged as an important public activity locale during the early decades of the French colonial period; and

WHEREAS, In 1724, the French implemented the “Code Noir” in the Louisiana Colony, which established Sundays as work-free days for all its inhabitants; and

WHEREAS, On Sunday afternoons, enslaved people took the opportunity to congregate in remote and public places in the city, at gatherings designed by the enslaved people to practice and preserve their African culture, including but not limited to drumming, singing, dancing, marketing, and religious practices; and

WHEREAS, Congo Square, previously under the names Place des Nègres and Place Congo, became one of many such gathering places for enslaved people before being designated by the Mayor and City Council in 1817 as the sole official gathering place for such activities; and

WHEREAS, The African music and dance perpetuated at those gatherings – and continued through today – influenced local, national, and international popular culture and made Congo Square the musical heart of New Orleans; and

WHEREAS, The Morris F.X. Jeff Municipal Auditorium (“Municipal Auditorium”) now occupies part of the land that was originally Congo Square; and

WHEREAS, The Municipal Auditorium opened in January 1930, first as an opera house, then a stadium, a concert hall, a Greek theater, an exhibition room, a setting for Carnival balls and a little theater for amateur dramatics; and

WHEREAS, The building was intended to be a cultural mecca that attracted events and restored New Orleans’s cultural legacy, following the loss of the French Opera House to a fire in 1919; and

WHEREAS, The Municipal Auditorium was segregated from its inception, drawing challenge from Civil Rights organizers; and

WHEREAS, In 1940, Black concertgoers protested to gain access to the balcony to see Black opera singer Marian Anderson; in 1948 the jump-blues star Louis Jordan risked arrest when he called for integrating the audience; and in 1953 a coalition of social aid and pleasure clubs managed to hold an integrated event, but full integration would not happen until years later; and

WHEREAS, The first major jazz festival was held in 1968, paving the way for the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival to kick off at the Municipal Auditorium in 1970; and

WHEREAS, In 1994, the building was officially named the Morris F.X. Jeff Municipal Auditorium, in honor of the creator of many of the City's recreational programs for Black children during segregation; and

WHEREAS, In the months before Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005, the Municipal Auditorium hosted scores of cultural events, including the Ebony Fashion Fair, the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship Conference, the AAU Jr. Olympic Games, the Senior Fest, the St. Peter Claver School Jazz Extravaganza, the graduation exercises of McDonogh 35 and Jesuit High Schools, the Answer The Ball School Parents Forum, and many more; and

WHEREAS, The Municipal Auditorium took on floodwater from levee breaches and had severe damages to its roof in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina; and

WHEREAS, The facility remains vacant and moldering to this day; and

WHEREAS, The Congo Square Preservation Society successfully worked to include Congo Square on the National Register of Historic Places in 1993; and

WHEREAS, The historical location of Congo Square, whose footprint includes the Municipal Auditorium site, is considered sacred ground; and

WHEREAS, Congo Square and Municipal Auditorium are "Cultural Resources," defined by the New Orleans Plan for the Twenty-First Century ("Master Plan") as "the physical things and places such as historic, archaeological, architectural, and historical interests as well as historic musical and artistic traditions and other social institutions and cultural amenities," which include "musical traditions, street performers, craft-makers, traditional culture bearers, secondline vendors, Mardi Gras Indians, and the venues and small business owners that support them"; and

WHEREAS, Louis Armstrong Park, where both Congo Square and the Municipal Auditorium are located, is designated by the Master Plan as “Parkland and Open Space”, with a range of uses that includes “a variety of passive and active recreational facilities, cultural facilities, and supportive commercial uses”; and

WHEREAS, The Master Plan provides that the City should “research the history and design of parks, and open/green spaces and develop plans to restore, redesign, reconstruct, and maintain these areas”; and

WHEREAS, Louis Armstrong Park is zoned as OS-R Regional Open Space District, defined by the Comprehensive Zoning Ordinance as a classification for large parks, which may include “certain ancillary commercial activities such as cultural facilities, performance venues, and restaurants”; and

WHEREAS, It is imperative that the City follows its Master Plan and Zoning Ordinance and only explores culturally appropriate uses – such as a performance space or cultural center, which may include a new home for historical reflection or scholarship – to the sacred grounds on and around Congo Square; and

WHEREAS, The City Council reaffirms its intent to prohibit certain uses, including government offices and public works and safety facilities, from being constructed in Louis Armstrong Park to safeguard the Tremé neighborhood from uses detrimental to its historic structures and culture; and

WHEREAS, Preservation, neighborhood, and cultural organizations have also demonstrated a commitment to the preservation of the legacy and significance of the Municipal Auditorium and Congo Square, with such organizations including the Congo Square Preservation Society, Greater Tremé Consortium Inc., Historic Faubourg Tremé Association, New Orleans Culture Preservation Committee, Congo Square Drum Circle, Louis Armstrong Educational Foundation (New York), Save Our Soul Coalition, Ashe Culture Center, New Orleans Musicians Assistance Foundation, Ole and Nu Style Fellas, Kumbuka African Drum and Dance Collective, New Orleans Black Mardi Gras Indian Coop, MaCCNO, Timbuktu Warriors Black Mardi Gras Indians, Tremé Sidewalk Steppers, Ubuntu, Unity 4 NolaCulture, Washitaw Nation Black Masking Indians, French Quarter Citizens, and Vieux Carré Property Owners, Residents, and Associations; and

WHEREAS, These organizations' wishes must be honored, and they must have a continuing voice in decisions about the sacred land in Louis Armstrong Park, including through the City's land use and planning processes; **NOW THEREFORE**

BE IT MOVED BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF NEW ORLEANS, That the City Planning Commission is directed to conduct a public hearing to amend and reordain Ordinance No. 4264 M.C.S., amended by Ordinance No. 26,413 M.C.S., as amended, the Comprehensive Zoning Ordinance (CZO) of the City of New Orleans, to provide that within the boundaries of Louis Armstrong Park, any permitted or conditional use otherwise allowed in OS-R, as provided in Article 7, must be determined to be ancillary to the Park's past and present uses to be allowable.

BE IT FURTHER MOVED, That Louis Armstrong Park's past and present uses are hereby established as a historic locale for community gathering and the conduit for the retention of African culture and spiritual practices.

BE IT FURTHER MOVED, That the uses of government office, public works and safety facility, and City Hall are facially incongruous with the past and present uses of Louis Armstrong Park and shall not be permitted within the boundaries of the Park.

BE IT FURTHER MOVED, That in the process of reviewing this request, the City Planning Commission staff is directed and granted the flexibility to make all appropriate changes to the proposed regulations and any existing corresponding regulations in the Comprehensive Zoning Ordinance, as amended, to establish consistency and continuity with the format of the existing zoning code, to add references wherever references are customary, needed, and/or appropriate, to make the appropriate adjustments to clarify any ambiguities or mistakes, and to make adjustments deemed necessary in light of public testimony resulting from this review.

BE IT FURTHER MOVED, That this flexibility includes the ability for City Planning Commission staff to address the requested changes through amending Article 7, including Table 7-1 and any necessary footnotes thereto; through amending Article 18 to create a new overlay zoning district within the boundaries of Louis Armstrong Park; and/or through a map amendment that would rezone all or a portion of Louis Armstrong Park, namely the boundaries of Congo Square as shown in the attached map, to OS-N Neighborhood Open Space District to preserve and safeguard the Congo Square's ongoing use as a gathering place for African drum rhythms, singing, and dancing.

BE IT FURTHER MOVED, That the City Council directs the City to stabilize, secure, and prevent further deterioration of the Municipal Auditorium during the pendency of this request and thereafter, using available FEMA grant funds and any other appropriate available funding.

BE IT FURTHER MOVED, That the Clerk of Council shall submit copies of this motion to Mayor LaToya Cantrell, the City Attorney, and the City Planning Commission upon its approval.

THE FOREGOING WAS READ IN FULL, THE ROLL WAS CALLED ON THE ADOPTION OF THEREOF, AND RESULTED AS FOLLOWS:

YEAS:

NAYS:

ABSENT:

AND THE MOTION WAS ADOPTED.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Congo Square, Orleans Parish, LA

Section number 10 Page 1

Boundary Description: See enclosed sketch map.

Boundary Justification:

The boundaries shown on the enclosed sketch map were chosen to correspond as accurately as possible to those from the period of significance. Historic maps and the present-day street plan enable one to delineate St. Ann and St. Peter streets (northeastern and southwestern boundaries respectively). The square's rear boundary cuts as close as possible to the front steps of the Municipal Auditorium.

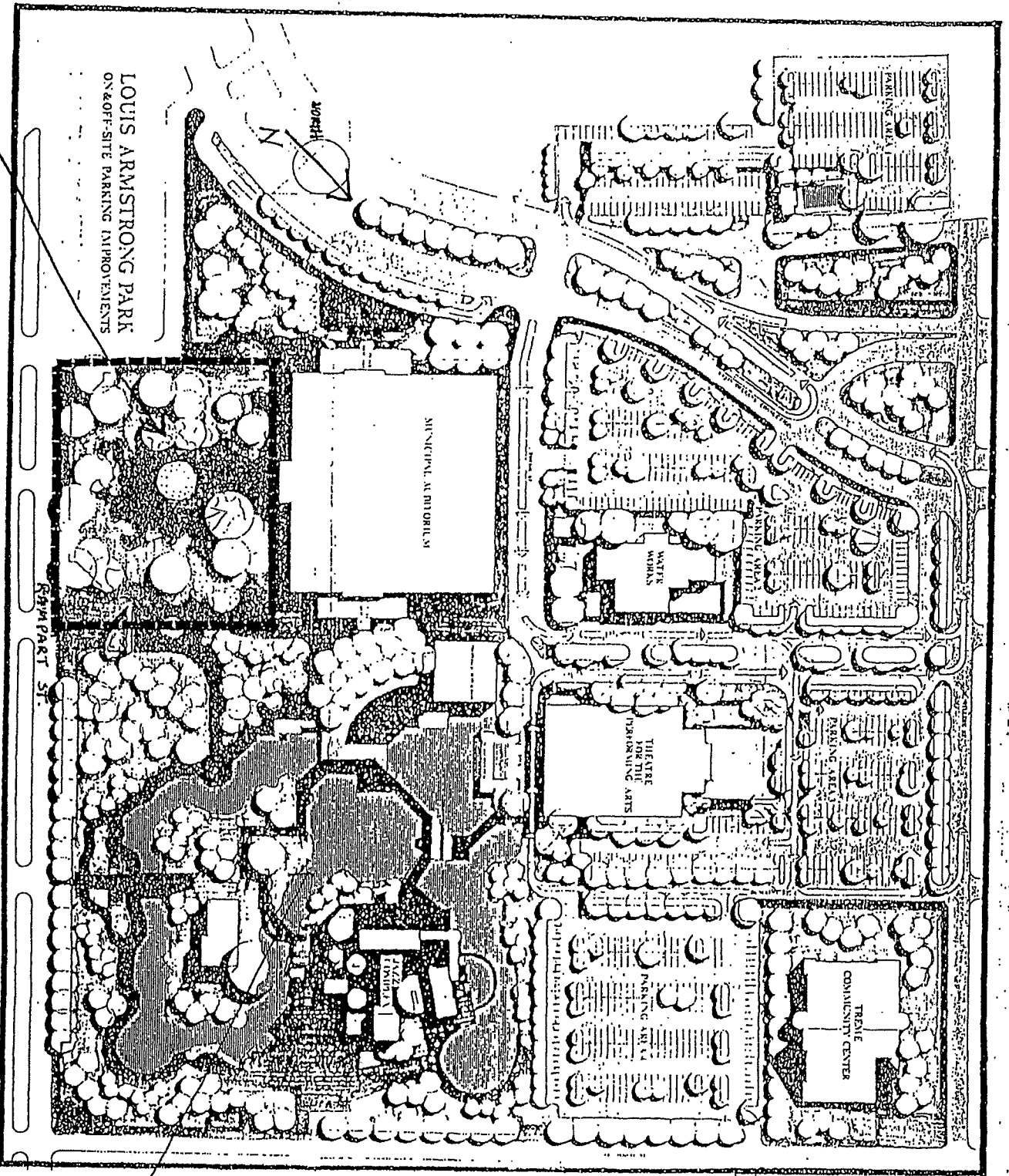
Congo Square

Parish, LA

Scale

$$I_{11} = 200'$$

BONNARY



CONGO SQUARE

Armstrong
Park