

RESOLUTION

NO. R-21-237

CITY HALL: July 1, 2021

BY: COUNCILMEMBERS MORENO AND GLAPION

WHEREAS, the seat of government is an essential element of civic life and access point to critical services for New Orleanians; and

WHEREAS, the site of the seat of government must be an accessible, inclusive, and functional space that draws citizens from every corner of the city; and

WHEREAS, the current City Hall is over fifty years old and has innumerable accessibility, safety, health, and functional deficiencies; and

WHEREAS, city employees who toil tirelessly in service to the public deserve modern, healthy, and safe workplaces that are few and far between in the current City Hall; and

WHEREAS, the past year of pandemic response has forced significant innovation and adaptation in the workplace and while challenging, some of those changes have illustrated opportunities to enhance the workplace, changes that should be incorporated in any new facility; and

WHEREAS, it is in the interest of all of our citizens to conduct a holistic and inclusive process to determine the steps that must be taken to remedy these longstanding problems which may include relocating City Hall to a new site or facility; and

WHEREAS, the location of and plan for a new City Hall demands robust public engagement from the outset with significant opportunities to weigh in at the earliest possible stages of discussion to ensure any new facility is welcome in a particular neighborhood but also accessible and functional for all citizens; and

WHEREAS, land use processes, such as those to seek a conditional use, were created to involve vigorous and early citizen participation and engagement to ensure the built environment is responsive to the needs of our citizens; and

WHEREAS, the Council has the authority to create a specific amendment to the CZO to ensure that any decisions to move City Hall would follow the most involved and inclusive land use processes; and

WHEREAS, the Municipal Auditorium opened in January 1930 as an opera house, a stadium, a concert hall, a Greek theater, an exhibition room, a setting for Carnival balls and a little theater for amateur dramatics; it is located in the historic Tremé neighborhood in Louis Armstrong Park adjacent to Congo Square; and

WHEREAS, the auditorium was intended to attract events and restore New Orleans' cultural position following the loss of the French Opera House to a fire in 1919; and

WHEREAS, the Municipal Auditorium facility was segregated and civil rights organizers challenged the color line since its inception; in 1940, Black concertgoers protested to gain access to the balcony to see the 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 here, but full integration would not happen until years later; and

WHEREAS, the first major jazz festival was held in 1968 and in 1969, another festival paved the way for the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, which kicked off at the auditorium in 1970; and

WHEREAS, in 1994, its official name became the Morris F.X. Jeff Auditorium, in honor of the creator of many of the city's recreational programs for Black children during segregation; and

WHEREAS, when Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, floodwater from levee breaches inundated the auditorium's basement, severely damaged its roof, and the facility remains vacant and moldering to this day; and

WHEREAS, Louis Armstrong Park is 32 acres and includes the Municipal Auditorium, Congo Square, the Mahalia Jackson Theater for the Performing Arts, and other historic buildings including Perseverance Hall; and

WHEREAS, Louis Armstrong Park began in the 1970s on real estate the city had spent decades appropriating in Tremé, with the first acquisition was in the late 1920s, when the city cleared two half-blocks of what was then a diverse, working-class neighborhood, to build the Municipal Auditorium; ensuing demolitions displaced hundreds of low-income Black residents from Tremé; and

WHEREAS, despite opposition from residents, the city in 1973 opened the Theater for the Performing Arts as a new venue for opera and Western classical music, later named in honor of Mahalia Jackson; the city turned the vacant land into a park dedicated to Louis Armstrong, who had recently died, later opening in 1980; and

WHEREAS, in 1992 the city funded the Black Music Hall of Fame, but the project later did not maintain traction; in 1999, the city turned over the hall and surrounding buildings to the National Park Service to serve as headquarters for the Jazz National Historical Park but those plans were being finalized when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans; and

WHEREAS, after renovations, Armstrong Park and the Mahalia Jackson Theater reopened in 2009; and

WHEREAS, Congo Square is an open space within Louis Armstrong Park, where historically slaves and free blacks gathered throughout the 19th century for meetings, open markets, and the African dance and drumming celebrations that played a substantial role in the development of jazz; and

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

WHEREAS, the City and community cannot move forward appropriately concerning the use of this precious and historical property in the Tremé without hearing from the voices of all of our people; and

WHEREAS, it is imperative that the City explores alternative, culturally-appropriate uses to this sacred place to preserve its role as a cultural center, potentially as a performance space or perhaps as a new home for historical reflection or scholarship; whatever the eventual use case, we should fully engage with and listen to the community in a thoroughly transparent process that builds upon the needs and desires of our people; and

WHEREAS, checks and balances must be applied to the relocation of a City Hall with public meetings and approval from the City Council; and

WHEREAS, a zoning mechanism can be applied through a conditional use to allow for this type of oversight for a future project which also would require public neighborhood meetings as well as multiple opportunities for public engagement; **NOW THEREFORE**

BE IT RESOLVED, that the Council intends to file a motion to formalize a requirement that a new, inclusive and accessible process be created to authorize any relocation of City Hall.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Council intends to begin by requesting the creation of a text amendment to the Comprehensive Zoning Ordinance to codify a required conditional use process to move City Hall and further ordain the zoning classifications eligible for such a conditional use application.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that it is the position of the New Orleans City Council that we should move swiftly to revive Municipal Auditorium as a cultural or educational center and that a thoughtful and inclusive approach be enacted to effectuate this planning process that fully involves and hears the community.

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

YEAS:

NAYS:

ABSENT:

AND THE RESOLUTION WAS ADOPTED.