



September 28, 2022

Madame Mayor and City Council Members:

Representatives from the Business Loop CID recently met with representatives from the Voluntary Action Center (VAC) to discuss the planned Opportunity Campus on the Business Loop.

The Loop Board

James Roark-Gruender
Chair
Passions

Michele Batye
Flooring America

Karen Geotz
Dive Bar

Sara Huaco
Carlito's Cabo

Ryan Euliss
Boone Electric

Jay Rader
Bus Loop 70 Properties

Linda Schust
Jabberwocky Studios

We have welcomed a number of social service agencies to the street--Boys and Girls Club, Welcome Home, and soon the Central Pantry--so we recognize the need they fulfill and the importance of an accessible location. However, we are concerned that locating everything on one street has the potential to impact the work we've done to boost the Loop economy and may upset the business mix we've worked so hard to balance.

VAC's project does meet several key needs for Columbia, including temporary housing, storage, health care, and other assistance. Having a safe place to shower, store belongings, and access services is a critical first step to getting people on the road to self-sufficiency.

VAC representatives welcomed our input on the facility and they've shown great attention to planning within the building itself. However, an assessment of the impact on the surrounding area and how to manage any potential problems has not been addressed. One key concern we voiced during our discussion with the representatives from VAC was that there appears to be less planning for what happens outside the walls of the center and no consensus on who bears responsibly for it. Managing a facility is only part of the project--managing the external and often unplanned issues that come with the facility is equally important.

What is the plan for people who are not admitted into the facility due to violence, drug or alcohol possession, or other violations of the center's policies? This will create spillover problems along the Business Loop as any bad actors become the public's problem rather than the center's problem. Whose responsibility is this to manage? Will VAC police the area or is there an agreement with CPD to do so? Will social service agencies be able to address needs that the facility cannot? How will VAC and the city manage the concentration of problems in one area?

Our businesses saw increased vandalism and theft when the "car camp" was located on the Business Loop. We also saw an impact on sales in an important commercial corridor for the city. It's overly optimistic to think there will be no similar problems with this new facility. What is the plan for managing this? How is VAC working with the city, existing social service agencies, and the police department to prevent this from reoccurring? How can CPD increase the focus on the Business Loop given limited staffing and existing priority areas? Will CPD be willing or able to shift their focus from an area such as downtown in order to properly manage the Business Loop?

The planned location itself is highly inaccessible and it's unclear if the impact of this has been assessed. How will the lack of sidewalks in this area create a public safety risk for a population that largely travels on foot? What accommodations, infrastructure or otherwise, are planned for those with disabilities? How will people safely travel to or from the center and other areas of town to access services, jobs, and the like? Where will most of the center's clients spend their days and how will that travel be managed? Or will people remain concentrated along the Business Loop simply because it's close by?

Homelessness is a city-wide problem but given that the campus is planned for the Business Loop our business owners, already impacted by this problem, have voiced these concerns. I've spoken with colleagues in cities across the nation and have seen first hand that a mismanaged shelter—or a lack of management of the overflow effects—can kill a street within months.

We urge the City Council to consider these questions when reviewing the plans for the Opportunity Campus and the unintended effects it may have on the Business Loop. Specifically, we recommend an analysis of potential spillover issues (either expected or unintended), a review of the impact of similar facilities in other cities, and an action plan based on the best practices of similar facilities which have been successfully designed and managed to avoid negatively impacting the surrounding area.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Carrie Gartner
Executive Director
The Business Loop CID