

A RESOLUTION AUTHORIZING THE MAYOR AND ALDERMEN OF THE CITY OF SAVANNAH, GEORGIA TO PROCEED WITH THE REMOVAL OF THE ARENA AND RENOVATION OF THE THEATRE, BALLROOM, AND COMMUNITY MEETING ROOMS.

WHEREAS, in 1972, the City of Savannah completed the construction of the Savannah Civic Center on the site of the former Municipal Auditorium; the seven-acre site includes the 9,700-seat Martin Luther King, Jr. Arena, 2,500-seat Johnny Mercer Theatre, Community Ballroom, several multi-purpose rooms, two levels of lobby space, and a 225-space surface parking lot; and

WHEREAS, the Mayor and Aldermen recognize the Civic Center has served as the site for important milestones for individuals and families, as well as for visitors to Savannah over the years since its construction; and

WHEREAS, the Civic Center stands as the largest single parcel in the Savannah National Historic Landmark District (SNHLD). Its construction preceded the enactment of the Historic District Ordinance, and the development was classified as an Urban Renewal project. This designation led to recombinations of the Oglethorpe Plan, including the claiming portions of the Elbert and Jackson wards, the diminishment of Elbert Square's size and prominence, the alteration of the street pattern, and a decrease in connectivity to neighborhoods to the west; and

WHEREAS, recognizing the significance of the Savannah National Historic Landmark District, the City has endeavored to restore the lost elements of the Oglethorpe Plan at this location. This goal emerged in the late 1990s, when the City explored the possibility of demolishing the arena, constructing a garage on its site, and relocating the arena while preserving the Theatre, Ballrooms, and multi-purpose rooms; and

WHEREAS, in 1984, the Mayor and Aldermen approved a request from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by naming the Civic Center Arena in his memory; and

WHEREAS, a 2001 Civic Center Arena Analysis ranked the existing Civic Center site as the least favorable of eight potential sites for a new arena due to limitations stemming from traffic congestion, the size of the parcel for future development, and inadequate parking facilities; and

WHEREAS, in 2013, the Mayor and Aldermen endorsed the Springfield Canal-City Lot site as the location for a new arena; and

WHEREAS, in 2014, the City established six advisory subcommittees comprising local community members and City staff to provide input during the initial phase of the new arena project. These subcommittees, tasked with considering the future of the Civic Center, convened regularly to discuss and conduct research pertaining to their respective areas of focus; and

WHEREAS, in 2016, the Arena Advisory Committee for Utilization of the Current Civic Center recommended retaining the Johnny Mercer Theatre, Ballroom, and multi-purpose rooms, preserving the arena for locally sponsored events, and restoring the two tything blocks to the south and the two trust lots to the east of the site. Concurrently, the Proposed Arena Feasibility Study, commissioned by the Mayor and Aldermen, advised against preserving the arena due to the substantial costs associated with renovations and repairs necessary to bring the building into compliance with development standards, including life safety, and ADA compliance;

WHEREAS, in 2019, the City requested the Urban Land Institute's (ULI) Technical Assistance Panel to consider the highest and best uses for the Civic Center site; the Mayor and Aldermen unanimously approved the ULI report which strongly recommended that the entire Civic Center complex be removed in preparation for the restoration of the Oglethorpe Plan; and

WHEREAS, in 2022, the Enmarket Arena, located at 620 Stiles Avenue, opened west of downtown. In the same year, the Mayor and Aldermen considered a conceptual plan for the demolition of the old arena, while aiming to preserve and enhance the Johnny Mercer Theatre, Community Ballroom, and multi-purpose rooms; construction of a new entrance to the Civic Center along the building's south façade; development of a new municipal office building on the north side of the Civic Center to reduce the City's need for leased office space; and restoration of a larger section of the Oglethorpe Plan, including two trust lots and four tything lots lost during the development of the Civic Center. Following this presentation, the City Manager was directed to study the proposed conceptual plan; and

WHEREAS, since 2022, the City engaged Akustiks, LLC conducted an assessment of the general feasibility of renovating the existing Johnny Mercer Theatre at the Civic Center and found that it is a community asset and could be transformed to play a leading role once again in the cultural life of Savannah, recognizing its demolition would be felt by many segments of the community; and

WHEREAS, the City finalized the Cultural Landscape Analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Civic Center site, as well as Elbert and Jackson wards, to inform decisions that minimize the loss of historic fabric, maintain the Civic Center site as a community amenity, and ensure that future development is appropriate to the character of the Savannah National Historic Landmark District; and

WHEREAS, the City is completing a Phase I Archaeology Assessment of the Civic Center site; and

WHEREAS, the City is conducting a comprehensive civil site survey of the study area to facilitate the redevelopment of the Civic Center area;

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, the Mayor and Aldermen of the City of Savannah, Georgia adopt this resolution and direct the City Manager to prepare and execute a plan, inclusive of robust community engagement and the required Council approval on annual or amended budgets, project financing, zoning, contracts and agreements, that does the following:

1. Proceeds with the removal of the arena and renovation of the theatre, ballroom, and community meeting rooms;
2. Achieves an equitable approach to redevelopment of the area;
3. Retains the name and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.;
4. Restores as much of the Oglethorpe Plan as feasible;
5. Prioritizes housing, including affordable and workforce housing;
6. Prohibits the development of new hotels and restricts the use of short-term vacation rentals;
7. Optimizes space for public and municipal use, as well as appropriate retail and commercial spaces; and
8. Achieves future parking needs.

ADOPTED AND APPROVED by the Mayor and Aldermen of the City of Savannah, Georgia on this the ___ day of _____, 2024.

Van R. Johnson, II
Mayor

ATTEST:

Mark Massey
Clerk of Council