April 12, 2017

Board of Park Commissioners

705 E. State Blvd.

Fort Wayne, IN 46805

Re: Indiana Tech Development Proposal for Memorial Park

Dear Commission Members:

The Board of Friends of the Parks has met with representatives of Indiana Tech at our Board meeting this week, and some Board members had opportunity to walk Memorial Park with Indiana Tech and Park Department staff this past Tuesday, to become familiar with the work that Indiana Tech proposes there.

In 2002, a Cultural Landscape Report was prepared for Memorial Park, with support from the Park Foundation and a Federal Historic Preservation grant. Its purpose was to engage the community in discovering the history and legacy of this park and develop a strategy for the park’s future that would retain, restore and adapt the park to meet contemporary needs. Memorial Park was found to be rich with surviving historical landscape design, trees and monuments. The Fort Wayne Daisies played on the surviving baseball field. Adolph Jaenicke laid out the park in 1918, including in it the planting of a memorial grove of trees on the high ground on the east side of the park. In 1920, over 1500 more trees were planted throughout the park and park drive construction was underway in 1923, when the playground was also enlarged. The Arthur Smith (Bird Boy of Fort Wayne) memorial was added in 1928, siting it specifically on the park’s high point, in the memorial grove. The WWI triumphal arch was added to the west side of the park in 1928, dedicated on Armistice (now Veteran’s) Day, that year.

The park was intended to accommodate motoring as a recreational activity, and the network of park drives connected to perimeter streets. Jaenicke purposefully recessed these drives into “canyons”, lined with evergreen trees (still in place) and rock outcrops to recall western landscapes.

The features noted above are all documented in the CLR as character defining features of a significant historic landscape and are what make it worthy of being listed on the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Park and Boulevard System listing.

The CLR makes recommendations for future development, based in part with conserving, protecting and restoring historic elements, while also accommodating contemporary needs expressed by Park staff and community members in the extensive community outreach during this work.

As they relate to the Indiana Tech proposal, the Board of the Friends of the Parks wishes to offer the following perspectives:

* The Cultural Landscape Report for Memorial Park was prepared to create agreement among City officials and the community about what direction the future of this park would be. The proposal by Indiana Tech does not appear to have come from a dialogue engaging the entire Fort Wayne community about a change in direction from the CLR. Memorial Park is not of concern only to adjacent neighborhoods. It is a park belonging to the whole of Fort Wayne. The Board is very concerned about the lack of open community process here.
* The softball facility is proposed for the location of the historic baseball field, notable primarily for its location and historic use. The proposed facility aligns with CLR recommendations for upgrading that facility. However, the use of artificial turf as a means of solving drainage problems is an inauthentic expression of the historic field’s materials and we discourage its use here and in other areas of the park.
* The sports support building is proposed on the site of the historic playground (since shifted somewhat west and provided with new equipment). A single story building is proposed on a site that slopes about 6 feet to the north. Historic landscape features have already been altered by construction of parking lots in the heart of the park, but the building is still an intrusion into the spatial character of the park. Recessing the building into the hill, reducing its visibility from the historic west drive and orienting it to the north would minimize its adverse impact on the park.
* The present parking areas were identified as intrusive by the CLR as they obscured the historic drive patterns where the northwest and southwest drives once merged. The CLR recommended alternate paving approaches, such as reinforced turf, for the few times the extra parking was needed for events. The proposal to consolidate and expand parking areas in the heart of the park serves to further obliterate the historic patterns and landscape.
* The running track proposes to remove hundreds of trees, including memorial grove trees planted and provided by Friends of the Parks in the early 2000s, mature evergreen trees creating the “canyons” of the oval drive, and mature shade trees planted by Jaenicke in the 1920s. This area is an original hilltop, with the Art Smith memorial column at its apex. The proposal would remove 8-10 feet of the hilltop to flatten it, then push the spoil to the north and south to create a flat terrace large enough to contain the track and related facilities. A hammer throw and discus area is proposed along Maumee Avenue south of the track. This entire area, roughly 400 feet by 750 feet would be security fenced. The present oval drive, the connection to the neighborhood to the southeast, links to the police and fire memorial and other historic paths and experiences would be destroyed. Pedestrians entering the park from the southeast would be forced to walk along busy Maumee Avenue and then along a security fence on the facility’s west side, hardly a safe or park-like experience. Although statements have been made about providing public access to these spaces, when they are closed, a significant part of the park is no longer available to them.
* The present, pastoral, “recreative” park experience that was essential to Jaenicke’s design would be permanently lost. Monuments in that area are proposed for relocation by this proposal, but once the Art Smith memorial is moved, it loses much of its memorial value, since it was purposefully designed for that hilltop, the point of the park closest to the sky, a fitting metaphor for a memorial to a pioneering pilot. The distinctive rolling topography of the park would be flattened, in a Midwestern landscape that is already very flat.
* Jaenicke’s design hand is very evident and intact in this park. He was highly regarded in his time and was an integral player in the early 20th century development of the landmark parks in the Fort Wayne system. His work is what gives Memorial Park its flavor and makes it worthy of this park’s inclusion into the National Register of Historic places. Construction of the proposed track and field facilities as shown will permanently destroy the most significant historic and beautiful landscape features of this park, something called “signature” by the CLR authors.

The Board of the Friends of the Parks is in full agreement when we ask the Board of Park Commissioners to take time to consider the master planning that went into the Cultural Landscape Report, use a transparent, community-based process to revisit the recommendations of the CLR, if necessary, and to fully understand the highly significant cultural treasure that is proposed for destruction under this recreational proposal. Friends of the Parks looks forward to an opportunity for further community study and discussion so that a well vetted decision is being made to an irreplaceable resource.

Sincerely,

Board Members of Friends of the Parks