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IN OUR OPINION . . .

Keep these S.L. meetings open to the press, public

Whenever the Salt Lake City Council deals with the redevelopment of the block immediately north of the City and County Building, it is dealing with large amounts of public money.

So it's essential that the council's meetings on this important exercise in giving the downtown area a much-needed face-lift be as open to the public and press as possible.

That's why it's encouraging to report that the city council is said to be strongly inclined to hold all its deliberations on this particular project out in the open from now on after initially having gone behind closed doors.

It's a stance that should be roundly applauded by anyone who cares not just about Block 53, as this particular part of town is called, but about keeping the level of government closest to the people as accountable and responsible as possible.

On Thursday, the council — acting as the board of directors of the city's Redevelopment Agency — will hear presentations from three contractors competing to redevelop Block 53 with a combination of offices, commercial outlets, and high-rise dwellings. While the public must know about these presentations in order to evaluate the final selection, the crucial meeting will be the subsequent one at which the redevelopment board selects the contractor.

If the public is to determine how ably its money is being spent on this project, it will have to know not just which board members favor which contractor, but also the reasons for the final selection.

Even after the contractor is selected, the details of this arrangement will remain to be negotiated. No one reasonably expects these subsequent negotiations to be conducted in a goldfish bowl. But the more that other meetings on this project are conducted in the open, the more confidence one can have that such negotiations will be conducted with the

public interest as the overriding concern.

The public's stake in the Block 53 project is substantial. Here is one of those rare opportunities to plan and rebuild most of an entire city block in the heart of Salt Lake City. What happens in this particular block can greatly influence what happens elsewhere in other parts of the downtown area needing redevelopment.

Then there's the public money involved. In effect, the city's Redevelopment Agency is buying property for fair market value, clearing the land, and then selling it to a chosen developer at a loss to the taxpayer. To finance these operations, the agency sells tax increment bonds, which are repaid from the increased property taxes the land brings in after it is redeveloped. Until the bonds are paid off, the increased property tax revenue doesn't go into the city's general fund, as it normally would, but is diverted to the Redevelopment Agency. So in Block 53, as in other such tax increment projects, the general taxpayer is taxed higher until the bonds are paid off.

It's a worthwhile investment, since not just the appearance but also the value of the land is sharply enhanced. But the fact remains that the taxpayers are paying for part of the project. (Developers buy into the project, and the Redevelopment Agency has other income.) So the taxpayers have a right to scrutinize such important steps as the selection of the contractor for the Block 53 project.

The way this project is handled can be significant for another reason. The council-manager form of government is still comparatively new in Salt Lake City and is still setting precedents. If the present city council avoids going behind closed doors, it will be easier to get future councils to operate where the public can see and evaluate their conduct fully.

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