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Dresden Elbe Valley World Heritage Site - response to Mayor Orosz's letter 26. 08.2008

Dear Director Bandarin,

as a representative of the various NGO's concerned with the preservation of the Dresden Elbe Valley World Heritage Site and the Citizens' Movement for the public referendum on a tunnel alternative, I am authorized to comment on the letter Dresden's Mayor Helma Orosz sent to you on August 26, 2008.

When the citizenry demonstrated in 1989 in Dresden and elsewhere in East Germany for a new political system, they also rallied for democratic rights. It is one of the cardinal principles of democracy that change be implicit in the process. Once political decisions have been made, they are by no means irreversibly cast in stone. This is why we carry out elections every few years, why laws become adapted to changing situations and why most German state laws restrict the binding period of public referendums after a specified period of time. This process insures that when circumstances change or political will evolves a new referendum can take place.

It is true, that a majority of Dresdners who participated in the 2004 referendum on the Waldschlösschen-bridge, spearheaded by the German Automobile Association, voted for a bridge across the Elbe River. It is also true that only 51% of the electorate participated in the referendum, and furthermore that the question for a tunnel alternative was not permitted at that time.

Unfortunately, the Mayor's letter fails to mention that the statute of limitations of the referendum expired in February 2008 and hence voters may be called to a new referendum on the issue.

It is furthermore a grievous oversight that the Mayor's letter makes no mention of the strong citizens' movement for a second referendum, this time for a tunnel alternative. Nearly three times the legally required amount of signatures for a public referendum on a tunnel alternative were collected between February and April of 2008. The tunnel would allow the preservation of the outstanding value of the site and at the same time allow a traffic crossing of the river.

Finally and most importantly, the Mayor, who places so much importance on democracy and the will of the people in her letter, omits to say that the Dresden City Council recently voted *twice* to allow a new referendum for a tunnel and that the then-acting Mayor *twice* vetoed the council's decision. Presently, the issue is in the courts.

It is for these reasons that the Mayor's testimonial to the democratic process should be viewed with a critical eye because her letter tells only one part of the story. It is a gross negligence of democratic principles as such to ignore the voices of 55 thousand Dresdeners who signed the petition for a new referendum, and to ignore the ever building frustrations of a large part of the cultural and scientific elite of the city who have

repeatedly appealed to city, state and federal government to open the way for a compromise. The signatures of many prominent citizens for the so-called „Dresden Appeal“ can be viewed on the internet.

In her letter, the Mayor refers to her duty vis-a-vis the Dresdners. It is indeed the Mayor's duty to find a solution which allows for a traffic crossing as well as for the preservation of the World Heritage title. It is also the Mayor's duty to take into account the more than 55,000 Dresdeners who petitioned for a new referendum on a tunnel, because only a tunnel will allow for this compromise.

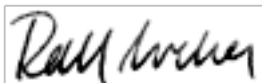
In her letter, the Mayor alludes to newspaper polls that suggests that a majority of Dresdners want this particular bridge. While these polls have suggested this indeed, the Mayor does not mention the scientifically representative poll, recently conducted by Dresden University's Institute for Empirical Studies in the Social Science which shows clearly a preference for a tunnel, provided that any additional cost would be assumed by the German Federal Government. Since a witness called by the city in the current court case attested just recently to the technical feasibility of a tunnel project (which was actually submitted by the city's planning department itself in 2003), and since the Saxonian State Government was assured by several letters from the Federal Ministry of Transportation that federal funds would be made available if the title could be preserved; exactly these conditions of the majority of the polled Dresdeners are met by a tunnel. Hence it is by no means the declared will of the majority of the citizens that this particular bridge must be built.

Max Weber was right: it takes passion and perspective to drill the hard board of politics. The citizens' initiatives who for many years have fought for a compromise that allows traffic across the river but would preserve the unique beauty of this outstanding symbiosis of inner city and natural landscape, should indeed be commended for their passion and their perspective with which they have resisted the destruction of one of the few authentic places of historic Dresden spared from the bombing raids.

In her letter, the Mayor requested a meeting with you in Paris. We ask you to extend any such invitation to representatives of the citizens' initiatives and members of those political parties in the City Council who for years have advocated a compromise that would assure the preservation of the unique and universal value of the Dresden Elbe Valley and with it the World Heritage Title.

Time and again we have appealed to the Mayor to meet with these groups, but to no avail. A joint meeting at the UNESCO headquarters would provide the opportunity to finally open a dialogue that German Chancellor Angela Merkel suggested after she welcomed the decision of the 32. UNESCO World Heritage Committee session.

Sincerely



Prof. Ralf Weber PhD

for: Welterbe Erhalten
Bürgerbegehren Tunnelalternative am Waldschlösschen
BUND Kreisgruppe Dresden (Bund für Naturschutz und Umwelt Deutschland)
Grüne Liga Sachsen
Fachrat Dresdener Welterbe

cc: The Mayor of Dresden, Ms. Helma Orosz
Saxonian State Ministry of Science and Art
Federal Foreign Office, Dept. of Culture and Communications