



Staff Report
City of Richmond, Virginia
Planning Commission



UDC 2024-09	Conceptual Review	Meeting Date: 5/21/2024
Applicant/Petitioner	Giles Garrison, James River Park System, Department of Parks and Recreation	
Project Description	UDC 2024-19 CONCEPT Location, Character, Extent review of a proposed natural exploration and play area, located on Belle Isle.	
Project Location		
Address: Belle Isle		
Property Owner: CITY OF RICHMOND RECREATION & PARKS		
High-Level Details: This project proposes a Nature Exploration Area consisting of re-purposed park materials such as tree trunks, boulders, driftwood, etc. for the purpose of play space.		
UDC Recommendation	Approval	

Staff Contact	Ray Roakes, Planner, raymond.roakes@rva.gov
Public Outreach/ Previous Reviews	Please see Applicant Narrative.
Conditions for Approval	NA

Findings of Fact

Site Description	The project is located at on Belle Isle, beneath the Belvedere Bridge and within the “meadow” space.
Scope of Review	<p>The project is subject to general location, character, and extent review under section 17.07 and project recommendations under section 17.05 of the Richmond City Charter.</p> <p>Items the UDC could directly review include the General Location, such as if this use is appropriate for this location according to the Master Plan; General Character of site improvements, such as the appropriateness of overall landscaping themes; and General Extent, such as does this project meet its stated goals or interfere with other City priorities or goals.</p> <p>Items the UDC could make specific recommendations on include the site improvements, such as materials, plantings, and site layout.</p>
Prior Approvals	NA
Project Description	<p>The applicant states: <i>“The proposed Belle Isle Nature Exploration Area (NEA) is a play space built of re-purposed park materials, including tree trunks, boulders, driftwood, mulch, live edge tables and benches, and historic granite curbstone. The NEA invites children to build confidence outdoors and step further into JRPS. The NEA project is part of a broader effort to expand the range of recreational experiences on Belle Isle which, according to a 2021 visitor study, captures a more socioeconomically diverse variety of park users than any other location. Part of James River Park System’s goal is to provide experiences that meet the needs of diverse park-goers and to broaden access to the Park through the provision of accessible recreational resources. The NEA is made up of easily built, low-cost, hyper local, nature-based play features that invite children to sit, stack, climb, dig, hide, balance, jump, gather, and manipulate natural materials for themselves. Park managers anticipate that this project ignites a desire in children to recreate in the park and to test their abilities, helping them develop gross motor skills and build resilience as they cultivate a relationship with JRPS.”</i></p> <p>Staff Review:</p> <p>The site currently consists of open space in the form of a meadow, under the Belvedere Bridge.</p> <p>The proposal includes new plantings, natural play space, seating, and landscape berms.</p> <p>The UDC members have previously stated support for natural play areas and Staff excited to see it implements in such a significant way in a central location.</p> <p>The Applicant has studied the amount shade provided by the bridge in their design and suggests that shade and sun will be adequately balanced for user’s comfort throughout the day. Adequate seating is proposed and will help facilitate parents while their children explore the space, both in shaded areas and warmer sun areas. Landscape tree plantings along the periphery will add opportunities for shade as well.</p> <p>The location is a central point of the island from a pedestrian standpoint for access, as well as one of the most visible locations for purposes of activity and safety. The location is also a difficult space to program due to being under the Belvidere Bridge, limiting possible uses outside of the proposed.</p> <p>The proposal will add to the diverse offerings of the island and expand them into an age range not currently well represented. The proposal will fit well with the natural and undeveloped theme of the island.</p>

	<p><u>Staff recommends:</u> Approval</p> <p>Staff finds that the proposal meets best practices for park design adding a new use to the larger park for different ages, abilities, and interests. The proposal includes additional plantings in a currently unplanted space. The proposal fits into the Belle Island theme of re-wilded area.</p> <p><u>Urban Design Committee recommends:</u> Approval</p> <p>The Committee discussed accessibility of ground materials and play spaces; dog safety and "no dog" signage; bicycle safety and separation; group seating spaces; planting choices; flooding issues; safety of natural material choices; safety of the bridge above; stormwater requirements with impervious surfaces, berm filling, and FEMA permitting; restroom and potable water access; trash receptacles; pet waste stations; and interpretive signage.</p>
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Urban Design Guidelines and Master Plan

	Text	Staff Analysis
Master Plan		
Big Moves: Realign City Facilities	<p><i>Vision: Equity, Sustainability, and Beauty</i></p> <p><i>Sustainability - City facilities can help showcase green building features.</i></p> <p><i>Beauty – Oftentimes, City facilities serve as beautiful landmarks that anchor a neighborhood and create a distinctive place through architecture and site design.</i></p>	<p>Big Moves: Realign City Facilities</p> <p>Much of the proposal includes re-purposed material.</p> <p>The proposal will add a new anchor to one of the City’s most active parks, adding additional interest and uses as well.</p>
	<p>Objective 15.4 - Reduce the amount of waste going to landfills.</p> <p><i>f. Demonstrate sustainable consumption, sustainable building practices, and zero-waste behaviors in the design and expansion of City operations.</i></p> <p>Objective 17.7 Increase and enhance biodiversity</p> <p><i>b. Increase the prevalence of native plant species and plants for healthy pollinator communities at public facilities</i></p> <p><i>c. Implement the RVA Clean Water strategy to use 80% native plants in new landscaping at public facilities by 2023.</i></p>	<p>Master Plan Objectives</p> <p>The proposal uses re-purposed materials and native plantings to both increase sustainability and habitat.</p>

Urban Design Guidelines		
	<p><i>(P.9) <u>Environment, Public Parks:</u> Successful public parks, both small and large, active or passive, share certain qualities, which include the ability to attract and entertain visitors, access and connectivity to surrounding areas, and safety and comfort.</i></p>	<p>The proposal adds a new use to the larger park for different ages, abilities, and interests</p>
	<p><i>(p.10) <u>Landscaping, Design:</u> Landscaping should not only provide a sense of scale and seasonal interest, but should also be designed to minimize human impact on the environment. Designs that include conservation landscaping, strategically minimize the urban heat island effect, or decrease stormwater runoff are strongly encouraged.</i></p>	<p>The proposal increases the amount of landscaping in what is currently meadow space. Minimal, if any, trees will be removed.</p>
	<p><i>(P.10) <u>Landscaping, Species Diversity:</u> Landscape plans should include a diverse palette of plant species that include evergreen trees, flowering and shade tree species, shrubs, ground cover, and annual and perennial plantings.</i></p>	<p>The proposal includes native species.</p>