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To: Planning Commission  
From: Urban Design Committee  
Date: April 21, 2014  
RE: **Agenda Item No. 8, Location, Character and Extent: Conceptual review of renovations to the RMA Plaza at 210 S. 10<sup>th</sup> Street**

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**I. APPLICANT**

Todd Loney, Department of Public Works

**II. LOCATION**

210 S. 10<sup>th</sup> Street

**Property Owner:**

The current owner is the Richmond Metropolitan Authority (RMA), however, Ordinance #2013-167-184, adopted by City Council on October 14, 2013, authorized the acquisition of the plaza and the parking deck by the City. The transfer of the property from the RMA to the City has not yet been completed.

**III. PURPOSE**

The application is for conceptual location, character and extent review of the renovation of the RMA Plaza at 210 S. 10<sup>th</sup> Street.

**IV. SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATION**

This project involves the extensive renovation of the RMA Plaza, a small urban park on the south side of the RMA parking deck at the intersection of S. 9<sup>th</sup> and E. Byrd Streets. Overall, the existing park is in very poor condition, with large sections of marble missing from the seating walls around the planters, heaving walkway pavers and accumulated debris.

The Urban Design Committee finds that the proposal is largely consistent with the recommendations of the Urban Design Guidelines and the Downtown Master Plan. One of the recommendations of the Urban Design Guidelines is that shade trees for pedestrian comfort should be the predominant plant material in an urban setting. Likewise, the Master Plan calls for providing street trees to enhance the pedestrian environment. As such, the Committee finds it important to the success of the park renovations that the existing willow oak trees on E. Byrd Street be retained, if at all possible, during the renovation work. The Committee also felt strongly that additional trees (whether they are provided in the ground or in planters of some design) and/or alternative shade structures should be located wherever feasible. The Committee also discussed the existing light fixture in the park, which is not known to be used anywhere else in the City, and recommended that a new fixture is provided that matches similar fixtures in the vicinity.

The Committee is supportive of the conceptual plans and the proposal to renovate the park, though there is additional information that will need to be provided during final

review. Therefore, the Urban Design Committee recommends that the Planning Commission grant conceptual approval, with the following conditions:

- That the applicant considers relocating the “entrance ramp open” sign at the corner of S. 9<sup>th</sup> and E. Byrd Streets to better facilitate pedestrian movement along the sidewalk.
- That the applicant seeks to locate additional trees in and around the perimeter of the park, wherever feasible, whether they are provided in the ground or in planters of some design.
- That effort is made to retain the existing Willow Oak trees on E. Byrd Street, but if that proves impossible during demolition, that those trees are replaced with Willow Oak trees or a similar canopy species as determined by the City Arborist.
- That the final plans include a landscape plan, to show plant species, quantity, and size at the time of installation.
- That the final plans provide details on all proposed hardscape materials.
- That the applicant considers using a pedestrian light fixture that is consistent with other lighting in the area, but not the existing light, and that the final plans provide details on the proposed lights, to include pole and fixture model, height, color, finish and light source.
- That the final plans include trash receptacles located throughout the park, and that the plans provide details on the design of such receptacles.
- That the applicant considers providing more shading opportunities on the site, not necessarily from trees.
- That the applicant reassess the pedestrian flow at the corner of S. 9<sup>th</sup> Street and E. Byrd Street.

**Staff Contact:**

Jeff Eastman, (804) 646-6348

**V. FINDINGS OF FACT**

**a. Site Description and Surrounding Context**

The subject property is located in the block bounded by E. Canal Street to the north, S. 10<sup>th</sup> Street to the east, E. Byrd Street to the south, and S. 9<sup>th</sup> Street to the west and is located in the B-4 (Central Business) zoning district. The plaza that is the subject of this project is located on the E. Byrd Street side of the property, and the rest of the property is improved with a parking deck containing five above-ground levels as well as underground parking, with a total of 991 parking spaces.

The current owner of the parking deck and plaza is the Richmond Metropolitan Authority (RMA), however, Ordinance #2013-167-184, adopted by City Council on October 14, 2013, authorized the acquisition of the plaza and the parking deck by the City. The transfer of the property from the RMA to the City has not yet been completed.

The parking deck and plaza were constructed in 1991 over top of the Downtown Expressway. The parking deck was designed to one day support an additional structure overhead. In 2010, the WilliamsMullen law firm constructed their headquarters building on a parcel at the corner of S. 10<sup>th</sup> Street and E. Canal Street, which rises alongside and then over the RMA parking deck. The properties in adjacent blocks include a surface parking lot, the City’s Kanawha

Plaza park, and several high-rise office buildings, including the Gateway Plaza building currently under construction.

**b. Scope of Review**

The improvements associated with this project are subject to location, character, and extent review as a “park” in accordance with Section 17.07 of the Richmond City Charter.

**c. Project Description**

This project involves the extensive renovation of the RMA Plaza, a small urban park on the south side of the RMA parking deck at the intersection of S. 9<sup>th</sup> and E. Byrd Streets. The site slopes downward from the parking deck towards E. Byrd Street, and the existing plaza features a raised central hardscaped semi-circle flanked by two large landscape beds planted with crepe myrtles and grass. There are also two large raised circular planters that are landscaped with an unknown species of tree and grass. A vehicular entrance to the parking garage occupies the southwest corner of the site and presents a conflict point with pedestrians. Overall, the park is in very poor condition, with large sections of marble missing from the seating walls around the planters, heaving walkway pavers and accumulated debris.

Aside from the poor condition of the park, there are some issues where leaks have formed in the structure of the Downtown Expressway tunnel, which sits underneath the park. The resulting waterproofing work to the Downtown Expressway tunnel necessitates the removal of entire central portion of plaza. The plans currently call for the retention of the existing willow oak street trees along E. Byrd Street, but the removal of all of the interior landscaping, to include the demolition of the raised landscaped areas. The interior of the park will now feature a series of undulating lawn steps cascading from the colonnade on the northwest side of the park. A wide central walkway of brick pavers will bisect the site from southwest to northeast, and the southeast portion of the park will contain a large, relatively flat portion of lawn. The lawn is proposed to be irrigated, and a portion of the lawn near the corner of S. 10<sup>th</sup> and E. Byrd Streets will contain a rain garden.

Though no final selection has been made on the walkway material, the design intent is to provide brick to provide visual compatibility with the material palettes of the adjacent RMA parking deck and the Riverfront Plaza across E. Byrd Street. The stairs are proposed to be a combination of brick and concrete paving. The stair treads/nosings are expected to be pre-cast concrete and will match the materials on the lawn steps. The plans also show ornamental lights and movable furniture being located in the central walkway.

This project is estimated to cost \$1,350,000 and is being financed through general obligation bonds. Work is expected to commence by late summer/early fall of this year.

**d. UDC Review History**

The UDC reviewed and the Planning Commission approved the design of the plaza in 1990.

**e. Master Plan**

The subject property is located in the City Center Focus Area, as defined by the 2008 Downtown Master Plan, and is placed in the Urban Center character area. Though not specific to the property, the Plan advocates for the planting of street trees to create desirable addresses and enhance the pedestrian environment (page 4.21).

**f. Urban Design Guidelines**

The Urban Design Guidelines note that “the selection of appropriate paving materials should be based upon the desired visual image, compatibility with adjacent paving materials, performance, durability, maintenance requirements, and cost” (page 3). The color of brick and concrete pavers should coordinate with building architecture and adjacent streetscape pavements” (page 3).

As to landscaping, the Guidelines state that “site landscaping should complement and soften new construction and building architecture” and that “plant materials should create spaces by providing walls and canopies in outdoor areas”. In addition, the Guidelines note that “landscaping should provide a sense of scale and seasonal interest”. Landscape plans should “include diverse plant species, including evergreen, flowering and shade tree species combined with shrubs, ground covers and annual and perennial plantings” and “shade trees for pedestrian comfort should be the predominant plant material in an urban setting” (page 10). The Guidelines express support for low-impact development, the goal of which is to “mimic a site's predevelopment hydrology by using design techniques that infiltrate, filter, store, evaporate, and detain runoff close to its source” (page 11).

The Guidelines state that “plazas should provide a pleasant transitional environment for pedestrians from the street to the building(s) it serves”. “Public plazas”, the Guidelines continue, “should use landscaping, public art, and historic preservation to create inviting spaces”. Lastly, “adequate seating, lighting and trash receptacles should also be provided in the design of plazas” (page 14). The Guidelines go on to say that “exterior lighting should also avoid light pollution by directing light downward (page 22).

**VII. ATTACHMENTS**

- a. Vicinity Map**
- b. Application**
- c. Plans**