



Staff Report
City of Richmond, Virginia

Urban Design Committee



UDC 2025-15	Final Review	Meeting Date: 5/15/2025
Applicant/Petitioner	Applicant: Ryan Rinn, Capital Projects Planner	
Project Description	UDC 2025-15 - FINAL - Location, Character, and Extent review of the proposed Browns Island Improvement Plan.	
Project Location		
Address: 500 Tredegar Street, Richmond VA 23219		
Property Owner: City of Richmond - Recreation & Parks		
High-Level Details: This project proposes multiple site improvements for and around the area known as Brown's Island. UDC 2025-05 CONCEPTUAL Brown's Island Redevelopment Plan was approved by the Planning Commission on April 1, 2025. The plan proposes the following enhancements and features:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved pedestrian access and connectivity • New plazas and gathering spaces • Enhanced seating and recreation areas • Expanded play and interactive features • Upgraded landscape and environmental design • Improved amenities and infrastructure • Event support features 		
UDC Recommendation	Approval, with Conditions	
Staff Contact	Kevin Costanzo - Kevin.Costanzo@rva.gov	
Previous Reviews	Previous Brown's Island Plan was submitted for Conceptual review as UDC 2025-05, approved at the March 13 th UDC Meeting and April 1 Planning Commission.	

Conditions for Approval	<p>Staff recommends the following conditions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Applicant shall revise the proposed architecture to more closely align with the design presented and supported during the Conceptual Review. 2. The Applicant shall incorporate standard seating options at <i>The Lookout</i> to improve visitor accessibility and comfort. 3. Final plans for wayfinding and signage shall be submitted for UDC review and approval.
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Findings of Fact

Site Description	<p>The project site is located at 1 Brown's island and is bordered by Tredegar Street and 10th Street to the North and West, the Manchester Bridge to the East, and the James River to the South. Brown's island includes hardscape and open space for events, as well as walking paths, and landscaped areas along the canal and river.</p> <p>Notable sites that surround the project area include: Historic Tredegar Iron Works to the North, T. Tyler Potterfield Memorial Bridge to the South, and the Richmond Canal Walk along the North Bank of the Haxall Mill Canal.</p>
Scope of Review	<p>The project is subject to location, character, and extent review under section 17.05 and 17.07 of the Richmond City Charter.</p>
	<p>Prior Conceptual Conditions of Approval</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff recommends that the applicant shall provide final details on a comprehensive lighting plan for the project area, ensuring that outdoor lighting minimizes unnecessary light pollution where applicable. • Staff recommends that the applicant shall provide final details on the use of permeable hardscape materials and sustainable stormwater features, as appropriate and in alignment with the Urban Design Guidelines. • Staff recommends that the applicant shall provide final details on the integration of public art where feasible, as well as opportunities for future public art installations. • Staff recommends that the applicant provide final details regarding the inclusion of sustainable considerations, specifically addressing additional stormwater retention opportunities and the use of permeable hardscape materials where appropriate. • Staff recommends that the applicant shall evaluate the feasibility of an additional bridge connection from Brown's Island to Tredegar Street or an alternative solution to alleviate potential congestion of micro-modal traffic. • Staff recommends that the applicant shall explore incorporating more art, history, and cultural elements into the design that might help to distinguish Browns Island as a unique landmark in Richmond. • Staff recommends exploring increased opportunities for ADA-compliant pathways and accommodations throughout other areas of Brown's Island. • Staff recommends that the applicant commit to continued public outreach and gathering community feedback to help shape the project's final design. • Staff recommends the applicant provide final details regarding species selection, landscaping and planting final plan for Staff's review. • Staff recommends that the applicant shall ensure a consistent design approach for wayfinding signage throughout the project area. • Staff recommends that the applicant shall explore additional site features that enhance connectivity and accessibility, particularly regarding micro-modal transportation. This includes bicycle parking and racks throughout the project area and the potential for public showers at the Haxall Garden location to support watercraft activities at the proposed dock • Staff recommends that the applicant shall provide final details on materials for proposed public buildings and site furnishings, such as benches and waste receptacles. Materials should be

	<p>aesthetically compatible with the surrounding context and durable enough to require minimal maintenance, including resistance to graffiti, natural aging, and weathering.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff recommends that the applicant explore opportunities to minimize built features that might detract from Brown's Island natural environmental features. • Staff recommends that the applicant evaluate ways to minimize built elements that may detract from Brown's Island's natural environment.
Summary of Primary Changes	<p>The applicant has provided responses and final design updates addressing the conditions outlined in the UDC's conceptual approval, highlights include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural and Historical Interpretation: Public art, interpretive signage, and cultural elements that reflect the site's history are included. • Micro-mobility Infrastructure: The final plan includes several bicycle racks and water spigot access at both docks to support rinsing after paddling. • Minimizing Visual Impact: The site and hardscape design has been revised to include additional planting beds and textural paving changes to soften paved areas and integrate better with the landscape.
Project Description	<p><u>Staff Review:</u></p> <p>Generally, the project includes improved pedestrian access and connectivity through widened bridge approaches and ADA-accessible pathways. It introduces new plazas and gathering spaces such as a welcome plaza, Flex Pavilion, and vendor kiosks to enhance public use. Seating and recreation areas are expanded with terraces, seat walls, trellis swings, and shaded groves. The design incorporates play and interactive features like a water feature, slide, and nature play elements. Landscape and environmental upgrades include tree plantings, planters, and permeable paving. Amenities and infrastructure improvements feature permanent restrooms, upgraded lighting, and public art. Additionally, the plan supports event operations with a widened esplanade and a pavilion designed for concerts and pop-up programming.</p> <p>However, Staff notes that the <u>final architectural treatment</u> of site structures, particularly the visual character of proposed shipping containers, mark a noticeable shift from the original concept. The use of shipping containers has become the character, rather than the containers blending into a larger structure. The industrial character contrasts sharply with the park's evolving identity as a premier civic and naturalistic destination as well as with the area's more historic industrial past.</p> <p>The UDC should consider the question of if the prominent visual of shipping containers is an appropriate general character at this location.</p> <p><u>Staff Recommendation:</u></p> <p><u>Approval with the following conditions:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Applicant shall revise the proposed architecture to more closely align with the design presented and supported during the Conceptual Review. 2. The Applicant shall incorporate standard seating options at <i>The Lookout</i> to improve visitor accessibility and comfort. 3. Final plans for wayfinding and signage shall be submitted for UDC review and approval.

Urban Design Guidelines and Master Plan

	Text	Staff Analysis
Master Plan		

<p>Big Moves: Provide Greenways & Parks for All:</p>	<p>Create a parks system that is easily accessible by all Richmonders and connected by a greenway network.</p>	
<p>Big Move: Realign City Facilities</p>	<p><i>Improve City buildings (schools, libraries, fire stations, police stations, etc.) to provide better services in efficient, shared-use, accessible facilities to better match and serve the growing city.</i></p>	<p>The Brown's Island Improvement Plan generally aligns with multiple objectives of the Richmond Master Plan, incorporating strategies for public art integration, sustainability, stormwater management, biodiversity, and urban resilience. The plan includes public art installations at Haxall Gardens, The Esplanade, and The Manchester Breezeway, broadening the definition of public art to encompass sculptural seating, artistic lighting, and interactive landscape features.</p>
	<p>Objective 4.2 – Integrate public art into the built environment.</p> <p><i>c. Link public art with major public facility initiatives (e.g., plazas, buildings, parks, bridges) and expand the definition of public art to include architectural embellishments of buildings, or landscape features.</i></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 16.3 - Reduce water consumption by 10% per capita.</p> <p><i>b. Encourage on-site graywater uses in public and private facilities.</i></p> <p>Objective 16.4 - Increase green stormwater infrastructure</p> <p><i>b. Identify opportunities for green infrastructure on public lands and rights-of-way</i></p> <p>Objective 17.3 Reduce urban heat</p> <p><i>a. Encourage lighter-colored surfaces for roads and roofs to reflect sunlight.</i></p> <p><i>b. Identify opportunities for green roofs on public facilities</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><i>g. Encourage bird houses, bat houses, and other structures that provide important and safe shelters for wildlife.</i></p> <p>Objective 17.8 Reduce light pollution.</p>	<p>Sustainable construction elements are integrated through the use of repurposed materials, green roofs, and permeable paving, supporting waste reduction and environmentally responsible development. Additionally, the plan incorporates stormwater management and water conservation measures, including floating wetlands, biofiltration gardens, and rain gardens to enhance water quality and reduce runoff.</p> <p>Permeable paving is also included to improve stormwater infiltration and minimize erosion.</p> <p>To address urban heat island effects, the plan utilizes light-colored paving materials, shaded seating areas, and tree plantings, while green roofs on new structures contribute to reducing heat retention. The landscaping strategy includes 80% native plant species, in alignment with the RVA Clean Water Strategy, and incorporates pollinator gardens, bird and bat houses, and riparian plantings to support local biodiversity and habitat restoration.</p> <p>The plan also addresses light pollution reduction by integrating dark-sky compliant, hooded lighting to limit environmental impact on nocturnal species. Collectively, these design strategies generally support the Richmond Master Plan's goals for sustainability, ecological resilience, and the enhancement of public spaces. Although there are specific Staff recommendations to better align with City objectives.</p>

	<i>b. Install hooded light fixtures on public rights-of-way and buildings to reduce light pollution and reduce effect on nocturnal species.</i>	
Urban Design Guidelines		
Transportation: <i>Paving Surface Materials: pg. 3</i>	<i>The design guidelines suggest compatibility, performance, durability, maintenance requirements, cost, and sustainability be considered when designing pavement areas. Impervious areas should be limited, and pervious pavement materials should be introduced, especially in minimally used parking areas.</i>	<p>The applicant has submitted detailed conceptual plans for surface materials, including a proposed hardscaping palette.</p> <p><u>The CONCEPT recommended that the applicant provide final details regarding the inclusion of sustainable considerations, specifically addressing additional stormwater retention opportunities and the use of permeable hardscape materials where appropriate.</u></p> <p><u>This condition has been addressed.</u></p>
Environment: <i>Public Parks: pg.9</i>	<p><i>Public parks are integral to the quality of life found in any urban landscape. Parks should respond to the environment in which they are located and should be designed in accordance with their intended use. The design of small neighborhood parks will vary from the design of large regional parks.</i></p> <p><i>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. It is important that the design of public parks facilitate programming that furthers placemaking, or the creative patterns of use that leverage physical, cultural, and societal identities to define a place.</i></p>	<p>The Browns Island Plan includes a comprehensive development of the existing park system. However, further investments to connect the island to Tredegar St would aid in creating further connectivity as well as mitigate potential safety concerns for egress of the island during high volume events. Additionally, while there are significant placemaking efforts within this design, further opportunities to distinguish Browns Island as distinctive to Richmond through art, history and cultural elements should be encouraged.</p> <p><u>The CONCEPT recommended that the applicant shall evaluate the feasibility of an additional bridge connection from Brown's Island to Tredegar Street or an alternative solution to alleviate potential congestion of micro-modal traffic.</u></p> <p><u>This condition has been addressed.</u></p> <p><u>The CONCEPT recommended that the applicant shall explore incorporating more art, history, and cultural elements into the design that might help to distinguish Browns Island as a unique landmark in Richmond.</u></p> <p><u>This condition has been addressed.</u></p>
Environment: <i>Universal Design: pg.9</i>	<i>Public park design should incorporate design elements that ensure equal access to all users. Site limitations should be</i>	The application improves accessibility to Brown's Island as it proposes new investments into ADA compliant

	<p><i>evaluated, and access to all sites and site features should be universal. Accessible ramps and other physical accommodations should be components of the overall design and not a separate feature, protecting the dignity of all users. Access limitations of each site should be evaluated and informed by public engagement during the design phase of projects.</i></p>	<p>infrastructure and facilities. “The Lookout” and “The Point” specifically include ADA accessible restrooms and pathways to allow increased inclusivity to Richmond’s public assets.</p> <p>The application improves accessibility by including ADA-compliant infrastructure, such as restrooms and pathways. However, <u>the CONCEPT recommends exploring increased opportunities for ADA-compliant pathways and accommodations throughout other areas of Brown’s Island.</u></p> <p><u>This condition has been addressed.</u></p> <p><u>This condition has been addressed. The CONCEPT recommended that the applicant commit to continued public outreach and gathering community feedback to help shape the project’s final design.</u></p> <p><u>This condition has been addressed.</u></p>
<p>Environment: Landscaping - Design: pg. 10</p>	<p><i>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 has provided an existing tree and flora inventory and has included conceptual planting plans for proposed design.</p>
<p>Environment: Landscaping, Species Diversity: pg. 10</p>	<p><i>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 a conceptual landscape and planting palette that is inclusive of native species. The proposal also includes a specific native species that will be pollinator friendly.</p> <p><u>The CONCEPT recommended the applicant provide final details regarding species selection, landscaping and planting final plan for Staff’s review.</u></p> <p><u>Staff provided additional recommendation for consideration.</u></p>
<p>Public Facilities: Site Features: pg. 14</p>	<p><i>The site should respond to its users through its design and by providing an appropriate array of amenities to serve those users and should incorporate sustainable design aspects. Plazas are encouraged and should provide pleasant transition from street to building while being designed in inviting and accommodating ways for a diversity of users.</i></p> <p><i>Connectivity from the site to adjacent areas should be considered during the design phase and include accommodations for non- motorized means of transit and other</i></p>	<p>A number of outdoor spaces and amenities add interest and usable space for pedestrians. This diversity of uses will enhance pedestrian activity throughout the site and engage with the public. Significant efforts have been made to improve public recreational infrastructure and Staff finds the Conceptual plans generally aligned with UDC Guidelines.</p> <p><u>The CONCEPT recommended that the applicant shall ensure a consistent design approach for wayfinding signage throughout the project area.</u></p>

	<p><i>micro- modal transportation, such as bicycle parking, bike racks, showers, restrooms, and air pumps.</i></p> <p><i>The use of materials and features that increase sustainability, improve air and water quality, promote energy efficiency, and reduce the heat island effect are encouraged.</i></p> <p><i>Public facilities should strive to capture as much stormwater on site as feasibly possible through the implementation of stormwater management practices. Practices such as the use of green roofs, bioretention areas, permeable pavement and pavers, and planter beds are encouraged. Conservation landscaping with an emphasis on a diverse palette of plant species is encouraged. New public facilities should be designed in a way that does not disturb existing, healthy trees that may exist on-site.</i></p>	<p><u>This condition to be addressed by Applicant in a separate submission package.</u></p> <p><u>The COCNEPT recommended that the applicant shall explore additional site features that enhance connectivity and accessibility, particularly regarding micro-modal transportation. This includes bicycle parking and racks throughout the project area and the potential for public showers at the Haxall Garden location to support watercraft activities at the proposed dock.</u></p> <p><u>This condition has been addressed.</u></p>
<p>Public Facilities: Building Design - Building Detail: pg. 14</p>	<p><i>Building materials should be compatible with surrounding uses and not cause visual confusion by using numerous different materials on a single façade. Material quality and design should complement those on the existing building and be sufficiently durable and sustainable. Building materials should be quality and require little maintenance. Where appropriate, substances that resist graffiti should be applied to building materials to reduce maintenance requirements.</i></p>	<p><u>The CONCEPT recommended that the applicant shall provide final details on materials for proposed public buildings and site furnishings, such as benches and waste receptacles. Materials should be aesthetically compatible with the surrounding context and durable enough to require minimal maintenance.</u></p> <p><u>This condition has been addressed.</u></p> <p><u>The CONCEPT recommended that the applicant explore opportunities to minimize built features that might detract from Brown's Island natural environmental features.</u></p> <p><u>Staff provided additional recommendation for consideration.</u></p>