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To: Urban Design Committee  
From: Planning and Preservation Division  
Date: October 5, 2017  
RE: **Final Location, Character and Extent review of modifications to the Checkers House Plaza (Monroe Park renovations), 719 W. Franklin St.; UDC No. 2017-35**

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**I. APPLICANT**

Don Summers, Department of Public Works

**II. LOCATION**

719 W. Franklin St.

**Property Owner:**

City of Richmond Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities

**III. PURPOSE**

The application is for the final location, character, and extent review of modifications to the Checkers House Plaza, as part of the Monroe Park renovations.

**IV. SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATION**

This final plan for modifications to the Checkers House Plaza serves to reconcile aspects of the renovation with an updated budget. The application proposes to replace the stone dust in the plaza with concrete pavers; remove eight proposed new trees; remove a planter bed near the stair entry into the Checkers House; remove two of three granite landscape steps while elongating one; install a granite curb between the stone dust path and the granite paver plaza, signifying a change in material; and add eight movable planters.

Staff finds the proposed modifications reasonable and attractive, and that they further recommendations of the Urban Design Guidelines for public parks.

Therefore, Staff recommends that the Urban Design Committee recommend that the Planning Commission approve the final design with the following considerations:

- That if in-ground trees cannot be accommodated within the plaza in a manner that is economically and physically feasible, that the applicant coordinate with the city arborist and urban forestry division to determine the best utilization of the planters for low-maintenance vegetation that will complement the building architecture and soften the plaza

**Staff Contact:**

Josh Son, (804) 646-3741 // [joshua.son@richmondgov.com](mailto:joshua.son@richmondgov.com)

**V. FINDINGS OF FACT**

**a. Site Description and Surrounding Context**

The Checkers House plaza contains an octagonal pavilion, known as the Checkers House. The two story, octagonal structure has a brick, Flemish bond, an octagonal hipped roof, originally slate, with a ventilator cupola. It is considered

Modern (Art Deco) and originally housed public toilets on the first floor. The second floor consists of a porch and once contained a room large enough to accommodate a single game of checkers. This building replaced an earlier wooden band stand.

The plaza is located within Monroe Park, a public urban park bordered by Belvidere Street on the east, Main Street on the south, Laurel Street on the west, and Franklin Street on the north. The park is surrounded by a number of high-density zoning districts, including multi-family residential, institutional, and religious buildings.

In addition to the central fountain, the park is embellished with two major statues and two smaller monuments.

**b. Scope of Review**

The project is subject to location, character, and extent review as part of a “public park” under Section 17.07 of the City Charter.

**c. UDC Review History**

This project is part of Monroe Park which is currently undergoing a renovation based on the Monroe Park Master Plan.

At the June 19, 2017 City Planning Commission meeting, a final review of Monroe Park Furnishings was approved with the following conditions recommended by the UDC:

- That, after repairing the first floor lintels, the brick railing of the Checkers House be replaced with a similar brick design and brought up to code with the installation of necessary safety measures. The National Register Nomination form for Monroe Park mentions the Checkers House and describes it as Modern (Art Deco), constructed in 1939. The brick railings define the Art Deco character of the Checkers House.
- To incorporate appropriate flashing and drainage as necessary when reconstructing the rail
- To mark or inscribe some gaming tables with a checkers or a chess board

At the February 21, 2017 City Planning Commission meeting, a final review of revisions to Monroe Park renovations was approved with the following conditions recommended by the UDC:

- That trees already demolished be removed from review as location, character, and extent.
- That the LED lighting be 3000K color temperature.

The Urban Design Committee and Planning Commission reviewed the Monroe Park Master Plan conceptually in October 2007, and then approved a final version of the plan in February 2008. In 2009, the Urban Design Committee and the Planning Commission approved final construction plans for the renovation of Monroe Park without conditions.

**d. Project Description**

The changes brought forth by the applicant reflect a need to modify project parameters to reconcile an updated budget. The following aspects of the project are proposed for modification:

Replacement of stone dust with concrete pavers (sand set) in the area around the Checkers House: This will facilitate easier maintenance of the plaza as stone dust may clog storm water drains in the plaza, provide an upgrade in material, and allow more flexible programming of the plaza.

Removal of (8) tree wells and metal tree grates: The removal of trees will provide increased surveillance by cameras that are to be mounted on the fascia/soffit of the Checkers House and it will allow more flexible programming of the plaza. The applicant states that tree health in stone dust couldn't be guaranteed by the landscaper.

Removal of planter bed at base of Checkers House stair between the (2) trees that are to remain, and the addition of concrete pavers up to the wall will allow public access to the wall.

Removal of (2) granite landscape steps at the elevation +189.9 and +189.57: The grade/slop of the land is smaller than projected and in its current design may prove to be a tripping hazard.

Extension of granite landscape step at elevation +189.23 by 8'-0" at either end for a total extension length of 16'.

Addition of 6" granite curb at (2) entrances to Checkers House Plaza: This will signify a change in ground material and will facilitate easier maintenance

Addition of (8) movable planters: The removal of trees will allow for increased surveillance of the area by not impeding security cameras added by VCU police, the planters will allow more flexible programming, add seasonal interest, and will easier maintenance of trees and/or plantings

**e. Master Plan**

Following the adoption of the 2008 Monroe Park Master Plan and the 2009 design of the park, the 2009 Downtown Plan contained recommendations for the surrounding neighborhoods and areas, as well as specific language about Monroe Park that "promote Monroe Park as the center of a campus and a community. With the growth of the Monroe Park Campus that surrounds the park on four sides, Monroe Park is becoming more important to the University as its primary green space, and as such has been endorsed as a central feature within the campus by the VCU 2020 Master Plan. The City and the Monroe Park Advisory Council have developed the 2008 Monroe Park Master Plan that will guide future enhanced use of the park as a cultural and passive recreational center for the campus and the neighborhood. This park plan has been reflected in the illustrations in the Downtown Plan. Respect for the park's historic integrity and increased maintenance and security are key to the park's success."

The 2009 Downtown Plan further suggests the park receive "...a facelift with rehabilitated public facilities, new shade trees, improved lighting, and wireless Internet access."

**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. Consideration should be given to the massing of impervious material..." (page 3). The guidelines further note that "simpler paving designs are more compatible with diverse building styles". 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 Environment section of the Urban Design Guidelines state that "impacts to the natural landscape should be assessed and should generally be minimized when constructing man-made elements. A preference should be given toward materials and construction techniques which improve energy efficiency and water/soil quality. Lighting and landscaping should allow for surveillance and policing activities, but should be designed primarily to accommodate the intended use of the park" (page 9). 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 Community Character section of the Urban Design Guidelines notes "site furnishings should be conveniently located for the pedestrian, but should not obstruct pedestrian circulation. Furnishings should be located where people congregate, such as at bus stops, in front of major attractions, and in parks and plazas. The placement of furnishings should not create visual clutter on the streetscape. Furnishings may be grouped together, where appropriate. However, trash receptacles should be placed in the vicinity of bench groupings, but not directly adjacent, because of wasps and other insects in summer months." (page 25).

**VI. ATTACHMENTS**

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