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To: Planning Commission  
From: Urban Design Committee  
Date: October 20, 2014  
RE: **Final Location, Character and Extent Review of landscaping improvements along Dock Street between S. 21<sup>st</sup> Street and Pear Street**

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**I. APPLICANT**

Mark Olinger, Department of Planning & Development Review

**II. LOCATION**

Along Dock Street between S. 21<sup>st</sup> Street and Pear Street

**Property Owner:**

City of Richmond and Chesapeake & Ohio Railway (CSX)

**III. PURPOSE**

The application is for final location, character and extent review of landscaping improvements along Dock Street between S. 21<sup>st</sup> Street and Pear Street.

**IV. SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATION**

This project involves the extensive landscaping of the land between Dock Street and the James River and Kanawha Canal, from Great Shiplock Park to S. 21<sup>st</sup> Street, adjacent to the Virginia Capital Trail and the elevated CSX rail trestle. Working in collaboration with various City agencies, CSX, the Virginia Capital Trail and other community stakeholders, the project is being brought forth by the Capital Trees group, which is responsible for several beautification efforts in the City in recent years, including the greening of N. 10<sup>th</sup> and N. 14<sup>th</sup> Streets and the redesign of Great Shiplock Park. The goal of this project, dubbed the "Low Line", is to enhance the linear park through landscaping and maintenance.

The overall concept plan for the Low Line, which is still under development, envisions (among other improvements) restoring the canal wall, creating a boardwalk along the canal edge, and building a pedestrian bridge over to Chapel Island from S. 21<sup>st</sup> Street. The work associated to make this vision a reality is detailed and complex and requires the input of numerous stakeholders. As such, Phase 1 of the plan is limited to landscape enhancements with the hope of catalyzing interest and investment in the area.

The Urban Design Committee finds the proposal to be an important first step towards realizing the Riverfront Plan's goal of activating the James River and Kanawha Canal. The maintenance work already completed has vastly improved the visibility of the canal, and the proposal will maintain those sight lines from Dock Street and the Capital Trail. The Committee further finds that the proposed landscaping and continued access will help to activate the canal by drawing people to the water's edge. Therefore the Urban Design Committee recommends that the Planning Commission grant final approval as submitted.

**Staff Contact:**

Jeff Eastman, (804) 646-6348

**V. FINDINGS OF FACT**

**a. Site Description and Surrounding Context**

The project area is bound by Dock Street on the north, Great Shiplock Park on the east, the James River and Kanawha Canal on the south, and N. 21<sup>st</sup> Street on the west, and encompasses two parcels, both of which are zoned M-2 (Heavy Industrial). The southern parcel is owned by the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway (CSX) and the northern parcel is owned by the City.

The Virginia Capital Trail traverses the City-owned parcel along Dock Street, beside and then under the elevated train trestle, into the south side of the floodwall, terminating at the start of the Canal Walk at Dock and N. 17<sup>th</sup> Streets. When completed the Capital Trail will be 54 miles long, linking Jamestown and Richmond, primarily along the Route 5 corridor. The trail will enter Downtown Richmond through Rockett's Landing, staying along the river into Great Shiplock Park, and then linking to the already complete section in the project area.

Immediately to the north of Dock Street are several surface parking lots and parking decks serving the tobacco warehouses that have been converted to primarily residential use. To the south of the Canal is Chapel Island, which is accessed by the western gate of the shiplock at Great Shiplock Park. The western two-thirds of the island are occupied by an overflow storage area for the city's combined sewer overflow (CSO) system but the eastern tip of the island is publically accessible and contains a number of trails and personal watercraft access to the river.

**b. Scope of Review**

The project is subject to location, character, and extent review under Section 17.07 of the Richmond City Charter as a "park".

**c. UDC Review History**

In 2007, the UDC reviewed and the Planning Commission approved Section 1 of the Virginia Capital Trail, which traverses the subject property from Great Shiplock Park at Pear Street to the floodwall at N. 17<sup>th</sup> Street. In 2012 the UDC reviewed and the Planning Commission approved the temporary placement of benches along this stretch of the Capital Trail. Those benches have since been moved to the Capital Trail trailhead at Great Shiplock Park.

**d. Project Description**

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The overall concept plan for the Low Line, which is still under development, envisions (among other improvements) restoring the canal wall, creating a

boardwalk along the canal edge, and building a pedestrian bridge over to Chapel Island from S. 21<sup>st</sup> Street. The work associated to make this vision a reality is detailed and complex and requires the input of numerous stakeholders. As such, Phase 1 of the plan is limited to landscape enhancements with the hope of catalyzing interest and investment in the area.

The proposed improvements in Phase 1 of the project include removal of much of the existing, oftentimes invasive vegetation beneath the CSX rail trestle and along the canal edge. This has already been completed, and 15 native trees along the canal edge identified by the City's Urban Forestry division have been retained. Work will be done to remove debris underneath the trestles and to level the ground. The topsoil in the project area will be enhanced with compost and other amendments, and an irrigation system or a series of hand-watering stations will be installed. There are existing pedestrian lights alongside the trail that will not be altered through this project. No additional lights are proposed.

The plans call for the removal of the 20 existing Zelkova trees adjacent to the Capital Trail. These trees appear to have been poorly sited – they don't provide the intended shade on the Capital Trail and several were planted too close to the CSX trestles. These trees will be replaced with 73 trees (alternating groups of River Birches and London Plane trees) planted in rhythm with the trestle supports. Additional sub-canopy trees will be planted along the edge of the canal. The plans also call for the installation of groupings of low-growing, predominantly native grasses, vines, perennials and woody ornamental shrubs between the Capital Trail and the canal, including underneath of the trestles. Landscaping will also be provided along the rail line that crosses the canal. The remaining turf areas will be overseeded.

In total, the extensive landscaping plans call for the planting of 117 trees (7 species), 475 shrubs (12 species), 13,350 grasses (10 species), 1,604 ferns (3 species), 7,934 perennials (15 species), 136 vines (3 species) and 33,000 bulbs (10 species).

The cost estimate for this project is \$825,000. Capital Trees has provided funding for the design work thus far, and is raising funds for implementation of the plan, with the understanding that the City will contribute 25% of the project budget subject to Council appropriation. Construction on Phase 1 of the project is scheduled to begin in late fall of this year and be complete by August 2015.

**e. Master Plan**

The subject area is located in the James River Focus Area, as defined by the 2008 Downtown Master Plan, and is designated as being in the Downtown Natural Area. This designation refers to land “that is untouched by development, and whose ecological features are preserved” (page 3.20).

In reference to the James River and Kanawha Canal, the Plan states that “new interest has been taken in the canals as recreational and historic resources” (page 4.43). “In order to draw more people to the riverfront”, the Plan continues, “visual and physical access to the James River needs to be improved and emphasized. Improving streetscape elements such as street trees, furniture and paving on streets that run perpendicular to the river will serve to both highlight view corridors and create enhanced pedestrian and bicycle access to the water's

edge. Terminating as many streets as possible at river overlooks will create additional views that will invite visitors to explore the open spaces along the river” (4.45).

The Plan also states that “the construction of the Capital Trail along the Kanawha Canal should be used as an opportunity to create a linear park to serve the residents of Shockoe Bottom. A linear park along the Capital Trail would help to provide increased access to the canal and river” (page 4.49).

Richmond’s Riverfront Plan, adopted by the Planning Commission and City Council in 2012, envisions activating the James River and Kanawha Canal by providing a dock and public access to the waterway. The Plan calls for better maintenance of the landscape under the viaduct as well as streetscape connections on N. 21<sup>st</sup> and N. 25<sup>th</sup> streets (page 81). The Plan notes that there are several obstacles to enlivening the canal, including the Federal designation of the canal as a non-navigable waterway, the inoperable Norfolk Southern drawbridge, which is fixed in the lowered position, and the lock gates at Great Shiplock Park, which are non-functional due to sedimentation (page 86).

The Plan does offer that a potential short-term programming adjustment of eliminating the prohibition on the use of non-motorized, personal recreational watercraft such as canoes and kayaks from the lower canal between 17<sup>th</sup> Street and the locks would provide much needed activity on an otherwise underutilized stretch of the Riverfront (page 86).

**f. Urban Design Guidelines**

The Urban Design Guidelines notes that “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”. As to landscaping, the Guidelines note that “landscaping should provide a sense of scale and seasonal interest”. In addition, “landscape plans should include diverse plant species, including evergreen, flowering and shade tree species combined with shrubs, ground covers and annual and perennial plantings” (page 10). The Guidelines also state that “plant materials should create spaces by providing walls and canopies in outdoor areas” (page 10). Lastly, the Guidelines note that “Maintenance should be considered when selecting landscaping materials” and that “significantly healthy trees should be preserved and maintained” (page 10).

**VII. ATTACHMENTS**

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