



To: Planning Commission
From: Urban Design Committee
Date: September 5, 2017
RE: **Conceptual Location, Character, and Extent review of the Allen Avenue Common Park Project, 400 block of N. Allen Ave.; UDC File No. 2017-28**

I. APPLICANT

Deborah Morton

II. LOCATION

400 block of N. Allen Ave.

Property Owner:

City Of Richmond, Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities

III. PURPOSE

The application is for conceptual location, character, and extent review of a new park area to be developed at the 400 block of N. Allen Ave.

IV. SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATION

The project involves the redesign of a public space that will include additional lighting, hardscape walkways, seating, landscaping, and improved drainage. The addition of two street lamps will help illuminate the main entrances into the park. The hardscape walkways, which will consist of compacted gravel and permeable pavers and the addition of ramps, will allow more accessibility into the space. Additional seating will encourage passive recreation, bringing more security and activity to a space that has often been considered a pass-through. An improved landscaping plan will provide additional shade, seasonal interest, and improved drainage. When paired with the hardscape plan, the new landscaping will largely improve, and decrease, storm water run-off on site.

The Urban Design Committee is supportive of the proposed design for Allen Avenue Common. Therefore, the Urban Design Committee recommends that the Planning Commission grant conceptual approval with the following considerations:

- That the applicant look into additional lighting for the space
- That the applicant work with the Department of Public Works to place signage to detract parking in-front of the ADA ramps on either side of the median.

Furthermore, the Urban Design Committee included several conditions:

- That Staff coordinate a discussion about the space with representatives of UDC and CAR
- To encourage and study alternate locations of ramps
- To encourage and study alternate locations of lights
- To follow procedures for light temperature and distribution
- To ensure that axial views are protected

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V. FINDINGS OF FACT**a. Site Description and Surrounding Context**

The proposed project consists of the median located on the 400 block of N. Allen Ave. between Monument Ave. and Park Ave. It is located within the Monument Avenue City Old and Historic District as well as in an R-6 zoned district, nestled among single-family residential houses. It is southwest of Lee Circle, which contains the Robert E. Lee monument on Monument Avenue and just north of Community Church of God in Christ. The median currently consists of hard-packed earth with patches of dirt where grass does not grow. It is flanked on either side by a majority of mature willow oak trees and a few saplings. Vehicles are allowed to park on the east and west sides of the median. Improvements to the roundabout on the northern side of the median has seen the addition of a sidewalk and crosswalks.

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. Project Description

Community neighbors known as 'Friends of Allen Avenue Common' (FAAC) came together in December 2012 to form a partnership with Enrichmond Foundation to beautify and transform this median. The Allen Avenue Common Board and Enrichmond Foundation signed a memorandum-of-understanding with the Richmond City Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities (DPRCF) in August 2016. By vote, Richmond City Council approved the receipt of the proposed gift in March 2016.

Currently hard-packed earth does not percolate after rain and grass struggles to grow with shade and compacted soil conditions. The neglected looking median is traversed but not really used by neighbors and visitors alike. With Virginia native plantings and the best certified installation practices, the Allen Avenue Common Park project will substantially improve the environmental health and watershed issues of the existing historic median.

Hardscape walkways and quadrants will invite movement through the space under the shelter of existing willow oak trees - while new seasonal interest of native shrubs, groundcover and perennials will encourage people to linger on benches or a low seating wall.

The applicant envisions the community enjoying lunch, reading a book, walking leashed dogs, mothers watching toddlers on tricycles and students playing 'corn hole' or Frisbee on a weekend afternoon. This space will be able to host neighborhood sponsored activities (Fan District Association) in every season of the year.

The current estimated budget for the project is \$175,000 - \$200,000. By signing the MOU with the Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities, Friends of Allen Avenue Common Park have pledged to raise the necessary funds, construct the park under City supervision, and take responsibility for its on-going

maintenance. FAAC along with community support is committed to upholding the standards of this designed space.

Neighborhood friends and FAAC board members initially contributed funds that are banked with Enrichmond Foundation. In Spring, 2017, a 'Friends of Allen Avenue' website was created and launched with donation links (www.friendsofaltenave.org). After DPRCF approvals, we are planning fund raising events beginning in Fall 2017. Two community garden clubs have given us grants, while two more community organizations have granted us funds payable when construction starts. Donations and sponsorships will be solicited for commemorative items like benches, bike racks, furniture, understory shrubs, walkway medallions and engraved bricks. Local businesses, real estate offices and churches will also be contacted for contributions.

Best construction and installation practices dictate starting the hardscape construction phase in the fall of the year when the existing trees are close to entering dormancy – this is planned for Fall 2018 if funding goals are met. First, prior to hardscape construction, appropriate areas of the site will be air spaded to protect and promote root growth and help remedy the existing soil compaction for better water percolation. Compost and mulch will then be applied to promote a healthy soil structure for the existing trees and a proper planting medium for proposed new plantings.

Permeable pavers will be used in the hardscape walkways and areas around the decorative stone medallions to control storm water run-off, trap and filter pollutants and promote ground water recharge. We foresee the hardscape phase of the project being completed before winter with the commencement of new plantings after hardscape grading has been completed the following spring. With the exception of necessary street parking and loading areas, the bulk of construction activity will occur within the median with careful protective practices concerning existing trees.

d. UDC Review History

Components of the site for the proposed project was subject to review in October 2014 as part of UDC 2014-35, a final location, character, and extent review for modifications to Monument Ave at its intersection with N. Allen Ave. The summary and recommendations from that UDC report are as follows:

This project involves proposed modifications to the intersection of Monument Avenue and N. Allen Avenue to address traffic problems and pedestrian safety. The modifications are designed to provide a safe location for pedestrians to cross, to reduce the crossing distance, to slow vehicle speeds in the roundabout and to reduce driver confusion in terms of navigating the roundabout and staying in the correct travel lane. Over the last several months, the applicant has discussed the proposal with the Monument Avenue Preservation Society, the Fan District Association, and the West Grace Street Association, and the applicant's narrative indicates that the plans have the support of all three of these civic associations.

Overall, the UDC finds that the proposed modifications will ease the confusion in navigating the roundabout. The UDC notes that with the

retention of the existing curb and gutter pan, the original design can be restored in the future should that be desired. The UDC is very supportive of the proposal to add pedestrian crosswalks and of the reduction in crossing distances, however, the UDC would prefer that all of the crosswalks are situated in the same orientation relative to the circle. The western crosswalk is set at an odd angle that throws off the symmetry of the roundabout.

The UDC is supportive of the proposal to plant no trees in the extended medians, and finds that this open space in the median extension will allow for sight lines to the Lee monument while simultaneously increasing visibility for vehicles entering into the traffic circulating in the roundabout. The UDC received recommendations from the Commission of Architectural Review (CAR) in their role as an advisory body to “the city council, the mayor, the chief administrative officer, the planning commission, the board of zoning appeals, property owners and individuals in matters involving historic resources relating to appropriate land use, zoning, and other issues”, and took these recommendations into consideration.

The Committee finds the proposal consistent with the recommendations of the Master Plan and the Urban Design Guidelines. Therefore, the Urban Design Committee recommends that the Planning Commission grant final approval with the following conditions:

- That the Committee is not in favor, at the present time, of providing structured pedestrian access to the central island of the roundabout.
- That the innermost eastbound and westbound lanes on Monument Avenue are marked with the “fish hook” arrows on the approach to the roundabout.
- That the location and orientation of the proposed crosswalks respect the symmetry of the original plan and strong geometrical relationship to the central circle; specifically, that the applicant relocate the sidewalk in the northwestern curb extension island as far east as possible to provide symmetry.

e. Master Plan

The subject area is located in the Near West District as defined by the city-wide 2000-2020 Master Plan, which recommends “Single-family (medium density)” uses for the surrounding properties. The Plan designates Monument Avenue as a Principal Arterial Image Corridor, and states that “Image corridors are key transportation corridors that have the ability to form an impression on travelers passing through the City” (page 110). The Plan goes on to say that “Enhancement of the City’s image corridors conveys a positive impression of the City to encourage visitation and investment” (page 110). The Plan suggests development and land use must be respectful of both the natural and manmade environment (page 227).

f. Urban Design Guidelines

The Environment section of the Urban Design Guidelines state that “Active parks should have adequate facilities (i.e. sports fields, trash receptacles, benches, running paths, etc.) to accommodate intended users.” The General Characteristics section maintains 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.” Furthermore the Design Considerations section suggests 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 Public Facilities section of the Urban Design Guidelines contains relevant suggestions on site programming such as “connectivity from the site to adjacent areas should be considered” (page 14).

VII. ATTACHMENTS

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