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To: Urban Design Committee  
From: Planning and Preservation Division  
Date: June 8, 2017  
RE: **Final Location, Character and Extent review of the Laurel St. Event Venue, 719 W. Franklin St.; UDC No. 2017-17**

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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 a new event venue within Monroe Park at the corners of Main and Laurel Streets.

**IV. SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATION**

This final plan for the event venue is part of a larger restoration effort called out in the Master Plan for Monroe Park, a plan that was adopted by the Planning Commission in 2008 with subsequent design and construction plans approved in 2009 and later updated in 2017. After years of research and community input, the Monroe Park Advisory Committee and team identified 1904 as the historic period of significance to which the Park is to be restored.

The hexagonal pavilion, as well as the associated circular permeable paver plaza, and adjacent lawn area will serve as the designated event venue. The combination and proximity of the pavilion, the plaza, and the lawn on the south west corner of the park is conducive to functions, events, and allows for low-impact maintenance. The addition of moveable furniture and seat-walls will provide more seating options for park patrons while developing a hardscape with enhanced ADA accessibility allows the space to be more inclusive.

Furthermore, paving with pervious brick pavers and bio-retention planters ensure the site will have a low-impact on storm water drainage. Additionally, the event space will allow for programming that will provide a revenue stream for the Conservancy that can be used for future maintenance and improvements of the park.

When considering the character and extent of the project, it should be noted that the *Magnolia grandiflora* (Southern Magnolia) and the *Acer rubrum* (Red Maple) are two species of trees that are part of the 1904 tree inventory. Although not likely part of the original plantings, the presence of a Magnolia and Maple speak to the history and the 1904 period of significance. It may be in the best interest of the Monroe Park Master Plan to preserve these tree species in any replanting plan if the two trees cannot survive based on the proposed program.

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

- That the proposed plan accommodate tree species found on the 1904 tree inventory in a way that can preserve or replace the species per the City's adopted Municipal Tree Policy.

**Staff Contact:**

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**V. FINDINGS OF FACT**

**a. Site Description and Surrounding Context**

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

The National Register nomination form notes that Monroe Park is an irregularly shaped, five-sided public park located in central Richmond, between downtown and the Fan. Its design consists of a geometric network of radial walks which focus on adjacent streets and on a central fountain. The design of the park and most of the features in it date from the 1870s; the modern plantings of small trees and shrubs tend to obscure the original axial planning of the park. The Monroe Park Master Plan contains a list of historic species that, at the time, existed in the park. A series of late 19th-century houses interspersed with monumental churches and public buildings, as well as several high-rise apartments and VCU residence halls face the western, northern, and southern sides of the park. These buildings range in height from two to eighteen floors, and include examples of the Gothic, Moorish, Italian Renaissance, Second Empire, Jacobean Revival, and Georgian Revival styles. The park is bounded on the east by Belvidere Street, a six-lane, principal arterial street.

In addition to the fountain, the park is embellished with two major statues and two smaller monuments, as well as the Checkers House, an octagonal pavilion which once held public toilets. Only one statue and the fountain are related to the plan of the park.

**b. Scope of Review**

The project is subject to location, character, and extent review as a "public building or structure" under Section 17.07 of the City Charter.

**c. UDC Review History**

This project is part of the larger Monroe Park Master Plan. 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.

The 2009 Monroe Park Master Plan sought to establish an event space on the eastern side of the park near Belvidere St. which consisted of a concrete stage as well as flagpoles.

The 2017 Monroe Park Master Plan (a revision of the original 2009 master plan, updated to address budget and sustainable elements) that was approved by the Planning Commission saw the removal of the concrete stage and flagpoles from the eastern side of the park near Belvidere St. “for a more flexible event arrangement in a location more centralized to pedestrian activity.”

At the regular meeting of the Urban Design Committee on April 6, 2017, staff presented elements of the submitted Laurel Street Event Venue conceptual plan with the intention of recommending that the UDC recommend approval for the following reasons: The pavilion, as well as the associated permeable paver plaza, and adjacent lawn area will serve as the designated event venue. The combination and proximity of the pavilion, the plaza and the lawn on the south west corner of the park is conducive to functions, events and allows for low-impact maintenance. The addition of moveable furniture and seat-walls will provide more seating options for park patrons while developing a hardscape with enhanced ADA accessibility allows the space to be more inclusive. Furthermore, paving with pervious brick pavers and bio-retention planters ensure the site will have a low-impact on storm water drainage. Additionally, the event space will allow for programming that will provide a revenue stream for the Conservancy that can be used for future maintenance and improvements of the park.

The Urban Design Committee highlighted several concerns regarding the impact of the proposed conceptual design on the character of the park. The Committee sought answers regarding the extent of the proposed tent design in terms of the frequency of events on the proposed tent site to understand how that may impact the maintenance of the lawn and the surrounding flora. In this regard, the Committee questioned the removal of the trees and further implied that tented events should accommodate the existing trees.

As the discussion moved to the pavilion, the Committee questioned the pavilion’s strong orientation to the Altria Theater. The Committee discussed the possibility of reorienting the pavilion to better address its placement in the park and its impact on the park’s overall circulation pattern.

The discussion then moved to focus on the character of the park and whether or not the Victorian influence of the improvements should be maintained or if the park should reflect more contemporary elements, resulting in the consideration that the Committee and the applicant review and discuss the Monroe Park Master Plan to better understand the character intent of the plan and subsequent improvements.

The Urban Design Committee recommended that the Planning Commission defer the conceptual design for resubmission to the Urban Design Committee with the following considerations:

- That the applicant examine alternatives to the removal and/or movement of the magnolia and maple if they are part of the historic species list as mentioned in the Monroe Park Master Plan of 2008
- That the applicant remove the proposed decorative paver crosswalk. It is not supported by the city traffic engineering department as it is problematic from a pedestrian safety and parking perspective
- That the applicant and the UDC review the Monroe Park Master Plan for discussion on character-intent
- That the applicant provide more detailed design sketches of the pavilion to include materials and patterns
- That the applicant reconcile the geometry of the pavilion and the pervious brick paver plaza with the site
- That the applicant provide an option of how tents may be laid out with the trees in place

Furthermore, upon conceptual approval by the Planning Commission, the Urban Design Committee recommended the following considerations for final review:

- That the final plans include detailed architectural plans and renderings for each structure, indicating dimensions, building materials and finishes
- That the final plans include a landscaping plan and schedule showing plant species, quantity, location and size at the time of installation
- That the landscaping plan seeks to utilize native, non-invasive species where possible
- That the final plans include a lighting plan, showing make, model and finish for any light pole and fixture, as well as fixture light source and color temperature

At the regular meeting of the Planning Commission on April 17, 2017, a motion was made that this item be referred back to the UDC and continued to the next UDC meeting. The motion failed by 3-5.

Thereafter, a motion was made that this item be approved with the considerations of the Urban Design Committee for final review. The motion passed 5-3.

**d. Project Description**

This project provides a dedicated space for events within Monroe Park at the corners of Main and Laurel Streets. This conceptual design addresses programs that currently use Monroe Park with an effort to look toward the future of the park's green space. Programming this event space within the park allows for a sustainable model for the continued maintenance of the park for decades to come.

The siting of this project will concentrate event space in the most appropriate area of the park, allowing park functions and rentals/events at the event venue to occur simultaneously.

The pavilion, an open, painted-steel structure, will anchor the project site and build a connection to the Altria Theater, building upon the architectural language

of both the Theater and the original Monroe Park Checker's House. This pavilion will provide covered space that can also be used for rental space and organized events. Materials used will complement the palette to be used in the Monroe Park renovation project. Since conceptual review, the pavilion has evolved into a hexagonal shape with the side pergolas deleted to create a more open structure.

The pavilion, as well as the associated permeable paver plaza, will activate this area of the park at the intersection of Laurel Street and West Main Street. The plaza, since conceptual review, has evolved into a circle layout which is believed to be more compatible with the existing geometries of the park and conducive to flexibility of use. In the Rhodeside and Harwell Park Master Plan (adopted as the Master Plan in February of 2008), this site was activated through the introduction of a carousel. As that has been phased out of the plan, this pavilion will act to create an active and engaging intersection that incorporates sustainable practices and ADA accessibility.

Adjacent to the pavilion, a large open lawn can be used to accommodate a range of activities. This space will handle a range of events that will provide a revenue stream for the Conservancy that can be used for park programming, maintenance, and improvements. Located on the street with the lowest volume of traffic surrounding Monroe Park, this site will minimize the potential for pedestrian/vehicular issues. This edge location also ensures that no damage will be done to the large trees found within the park, though the removal of two trees will be required. These trees will be replaced in alternate locations within the park, in kind, with larger caliper than required by City standard.

Lighting will be provided by surrounding street lights (along pathways) and by wall lights in the proposed seatwall. The pavilion will have integrated lighting within its domed ceiling.

**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 Environment section of the Urban Design Guidelines state that “parks should respond to the environment in which they are located and should be designed in accordance with their intended use.” It continues stating 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.” In regards to plazas, the section states “the design of...plazas should avoid large changes in grade from the street. Plazas should provide a pleasant transitional environment for pedestrians from the street to the building(s) it serves. Public plazas should use landscaping, public art, and historic preservation to create inviting spaces. Adequate seating, lighting and trash receptacles should also be provided in the design of plazas” (page 14).

The Community Character section of the Urban Design Guidelines notes “The color of brick and concrete pavers should coordinate with building architecture and adjacent streetscape pavements” (page 20). The section notes that “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**