



City of Richmond, Virginia
Department of Planning and Development Review
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To: Planning Commission
From: Urban Design Committee
File ID: UDC-090677-2021
Date: May 17th, 2021
RE: **Final location, character, and extent review of Tidewater Connection Locks stairs replacement; Canal Walk between 12th Street and Virginia Street; UDC 2021-19**

I. APPLICANT

Kevin Vonck, Acting Director, Planning and Development Review

II. LOCATION

Canal Walk between 12th Street and Virginia Street

Property Owner:

City of Richmond

III. PURPOSE

The application is for final location, character, and extent review of the Tidewater Connection Locks stair replacement.

IV. SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATION

The proposed improvements to the Tidewater Connection Locks will include replacement of the existing wooden stairs with new wooden stairs located a few yards south of their current location. The new location for the stairs will allow for the construction of a new deck landing and for access to open space between the canal walk and locks which is currently not utilized. New landscaping and fencing will create a safer and more enjoyable environment for passersby who are entering the canal walk from this location.

The Urban Design Committee recommends that the Planning Commission approve the final design with the following conditions:

- Applicant consider the feasibility of utilizing a composite, maintenance-free, slip-resistant material for the stairs and decking. If that is not feasible, all wooden elements should be treated lumber, either painted or stained.

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V. FINDINGS OF FACT

a. Site Description and Surrounding Context

The Tidewater Locks are located in Downtown Richmond, bordered by 12th Street to the west, 13th Street to the East, and the Downtown Expressway to the north. The project area is only accessible by foot, and is surrounded by high-rise apartment and office buildings.

b. Scope of Review

The project is subject to location, character, and extent review as part of a “square, park or other public way or ground” in accordance with Section 17.07 of the Richmond City Charter.

c. UDC Review History

The Urban Design Committee has not previously reviewed any projects for this specific location.

d. Project Description

Currently, the locks are accessed on foot using wooden stairs that abut a retaining wall that supports the hillside connecting 13th street to the canal walk below. 13th Street in this location is cobblestone and closed to traffic, with two large planters blocking the entrance which connects to an adjacent parking lot. There is no formal landscaping in this location; however, the adjacent hillside is wooded, containing ivy, trees, and other wild flora. The stair case terminates into an open paved area continuing under a historic stone bridge and along the Kanawha Canal.

The retaining wall itself is beginning to degrade, creating a safety issue, and the stairs will need to be relocated. The existing stairs will be relocated a few yards south. Rather than switching back directly to the north side of the Canal Walk, the stairs will first land on the surface between the Tidewater Connection Locks, where a wooden deck will be constructed. The deck will include benches and landscaped areas, including stairs off of the proposed deck into a small green space. A metal decorative fence matching the existing will be installed along the edges of the canal where one does not currently exist, Improvements to this new “place” on the Canal Walk will include interpretive signage and a public art component (for future review).

From the deck, a connection will be built to the lower stretch of stairs that can be preserved from the existing stairway, providing access to the Canal Walk at the same point that exists today. Venture Richmond is responsible for operating and maintaining the Canal Walk and because this is an impending safety issue, the stairs need to be replaced regardless. Our preference is to keep the retaining wall in place pending future development in this area, but to construct the new stairs and deck as soon as possible. Construction will be performed by Venture Richmond contractors and will be funded by Venture Richmond at an estimated cost of \$25,000.

Staff notes that while the scope of this project does not include any proposed ADA accessibility improvements, there are existing ADA entrances to the Canal Walk near Virginia Street and as well near 14th Street and the turning basin.

e. Master Plan

The City of Richmond’s Master Plan, Richmond 300, does not mention the Tidewater Locks area specifically. However, the plan does state that the reopening of the historic canal locks provides a recreational amenity and tourism attraction, as well as access for boats between the James River and the Haxall

Canal, and recommends that the City work with other stakeholders to improve, restore, and maintain the historic canal system (see Goals 6–10).

More specifically, the City of Richmond’s Riverfront Master Plan speaks to allocating funding for safety improvements along the James River and Kanawha Canal as part of Priority #1 on page 204.

f. Urban Design Guidelines

Certain design considerations should be addressed in any project, regardless of the type of park. Historic elements should be surveyed and preservation should be considered for both facilities and landscapes. Impacts to the natural landscape should be assessed and should generally be minimized when constructing man-made elements. (pg. 9) The scope of work will not impact any of the historic elements within the project area, such as the retaining wall and canal locks, and arched stone bridge and tunnel.

Landscape plans should include diverse plant species, including evergreen, flowering and shade tree species combined with shrubs, ground covers and annual and perennial plantings. Shade trees for pedestrian comfort should be the predominant plant material in an urban setting. (10) The landscape plan contains a variety of native plant species including eastern red bud, blueflag iris, winter berry, serviceberry, Virginia sweetspire, and amsonia.

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. (25) Proposed site furnishing are built-in benches on the proposed deck. The benches will be located in an area that is convenient to pedestrians and will not impede pedestrian flow.

Site furnishings should be durable, both in construction and finish, and be easy to maintain and to install. Site furnishings should have vandal-resistant features. Replacement parts or components should be readily available and easily installed. Finish colors should be easily matched. (25) The new stairs, deck, and benches are proposed to be wood. Staff recommends that all wooden elements be treated lumber and painted or stained a neutral color to protect the wood.

VI. ATTACHMENTS

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