



To: Urban Design Committee
From: Planning and Preservation Division
Date: June 7, 2018
RE: **Modifications to VCU School of Engineering – Engineering Building (ERB) Streetscape Encroachments, 601 W. Main St.; UDC 2018-22**

I. APPLICANT

Keith Van Inwegen, Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU)

II. LOCATION

City right-of-way along W. Cary St. between S. Belvidere and S. Madison Streets and along S. Belvidere and S. Madison Streets.

Property Owner:

City of Richmond

III. PURPOSE

The application is for review of streetscape encroachments into the City right-of-way along W. Cary St. between S. Belvidere and S. Madison Streets and along S. Belvidere and S. Madison Streets.

IV. SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATION

The proposed modifications attempt to create a more unified character for both VCU and the downtown community of Monroe Ward through the extension of brick pavers up Belvidere St. and Madison St. The proposed design further promotes walkability with enhanced pedestrian amenities such as an additional curb bump out and the movement of a cobra head street light onto new, extended sidewalk to better accommodate pedestrian traffic.

However, the auspicious removal of existing trees along the eastern side of Belvidere St. to provide a wider sidewalk for walkability may prove more of a detriment than a benefit to the pedestrian experience. Additionally, the proposed removal of trees is in direct opposition with the Downtown Master Plan which states “that street trees should be consistently planted along Belvidere and other main streets to emphasize their role as primary Downtown thoroughfares” (page 4.15).”

As it currently exists the sidewalk along Belvidere St., from Cary St. to Franklin St., provides a 4’ clearance at each tree well along with shade. The proposed removal of trees along approximately half a block would provide a 9’ clearance without shade. The removal of these trees will diminish the already minimal shade that is provided for pedestrians, both students and city residents.

Therefore, Staff recommends that the Urban Design Committee recommend that the Department of Public Works approve the final design, with the following conditions:

- To retain the existing trees along Belvidere St.
- To increase the urban tree canopy where possible

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V. FINDINGS OF FACT

a. Site Description and Surrounding Context

The subject right-of-way is located in the vicinity of the Virginia Commonwealth University Monroe Campus along the north side of W. Cary St. between S. Belvidere St. and S. Madison St.; along a stretch on the east side of S. Belvidere north from where it intersects with W. Cary St.; and along a stretch on the west side of Madison St. north from where it intersects with W. Cary St.

The right-of-way is adjacent to the current School of Engineering buildings, which lie to the north of W. Cary St. To the south, across W. Cary St., is mixed-use student housing with several commercial establishments, mostly restaurants, on the ground floor. The surrounding area lies within the B-3 (General Business District) zoning district.

The programming of abutting streets are as follows: W. Cary St. carries eastbound, one-way traffic on two lanes and contains one lane of side street parking on either side; S. Belvidere, a seven lane arterial, carries northbound traffic on three lanes and southbound traffic on three lanes with an eastbound turn lane, there is no side street parking; S. Madison St. carries northbound, one-way traffic with a side street parking lane on each side.

b. Scope of Review

This is a modification to the original project (UDC 2018-12) which involves the provision of brick sidewalks, curb bump outs, granite curbs, street trees, and decorative street lights along the subject right-of-way. The propose modifications will see the extension of brick pavers along Belvidere St. and along Madison St.; the movement of a cobra head light; and the addition of a curb bump near the intersection of W. Cary St. and Madison St. The City owns the rights-of-way, but VCU will perform all of the work and will be responsible for all of the maintenance, which puts the improvements in the category of encroachments.

The encroachment process is administered through the Department of Public Works, which has requested that the Urban Design Committee (UDC) provide design advice on certain types of encroachments. The UDC does not have the authority to approve encroachments, but rather provides advice to the Department of Public Works.

c. UDC Review History

At the regular March 2018 meeting of the UDC, this application was recommended for approval with the following conditions:

- To incorporate the addition of one street tree in the planting bed near the south crosswalk (within the proposed curb bump out)

VCU has received recommendations of approval for various streetscape encroachments in the Monroe Park Campus the past few years, including City right-of-way adjacent to 601 W. Broad St. and 608 W. Grace St.

The UDC has also delegated certain routine items to staff for administrative review and approval, one example being VCU “standard” streetscape encroachment requests provided that criteria is met that follows the “VCU Standard Streetscape Encroachment Package”, dated June 9, 2016. This project proposes curb bump outs that propose to narrow existing curb-face to curb-face dimensions, therefore this application is subject to review by the committee.

d. Project Description

The modification seeks to extend brick pavers along Belvidere St. and Madison St.; move a cobra head light; and install a curb bump out near the intersection of Madison St. and W. Cary St. This proposal is for a modification to the original project described below.

Virginia Commonwealth University is planning a new Engineering Research Building (ERB). The building will be located on the Monroe Park Campus adjacent to the current School of Engineering (SoEgr) buildings. Due to successful expansion of the School to date and planned growth in research funding, the need for the new space is immediate. The current SoEgr facilities will reach maximum use no later than 2017; therefore, an additional adjacent facility is critical to enable the school to meet the University’s Master Plan objectives. The primary focus of the ERB will be research and economic development.

The project site is bound by Belvidere Street, Cary Street and Madison Street. At the corner of Belvidere and Cary Street a curb bump out will be added for pedestrian safety. The streetscape will utilize the VCU campus standards to create a unified look that ties the campus together. The VCU campus standard brick paver will be used along the sidewalks and leading into the courtyard. Where possible the light fixtures will be protected during construction. Along Cary Street, the streetlights will be replaced with the VCU campus standard spaced between the new tree trenches to provide adequate light coverage and prevent blockage from trees. The cobra head light at the corner of Belvidere and Cary Street will be moved out to the edge of the new curb bump out. The street trees along Cary Street are located too close to the construction zone for the new building and will have to be replace. New tree trenches will be installed along the street to give the street tree root zone room to expand under the pavement. The tree trenches have been strategically placed along Cary Street to reduce dangerous mid-block crossing by students. The selected native street trees have been selected for their ability to thrive in tough conditions. A combination of grasses and irises will provide a “green” mulch cover in the tree trenches.

e. Master Plan

The subject right-of-way is located in the VCU & Downtown Neighborhoods Focus Area, as defined by the 2008 Downtown Master Plan, which designates the area as being part of the Urban Center area. One of the recommendations of the Plan is that “it is essential that trees are planted along all primary Downtown streets in order to create walkable districts” (page 4.15). Specific to the project area, the Plan notes that street trees should be consistently planted along Belvidere and other main streets to “emphasize their role as primary Downtown thoroughfares” (page 4.15).

f. Urban Design Guidelines

The Urban Design Guidelines states “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” (page 3). The Guidelines further note that “simpler paving designs are more compatible with diverse building styles and better unify the various design elements found on City streets” (page 3). The Guidelines also note that “existing granite curbing should be retained” and that “the number, size and location of curb cuts should be examined for potential conflicts with pedestrian and vehicular circulation” (page 4). Lastly, the Guidelines state that “streetscape elements, such as street trees and street lighting, should be used to encourage pedestrian activity” (page 5).

VI. ATTACHMENTS

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