



To: Urban Design Committee
From: Planning and Preservation Division
Date: February 5, 2015
RE: **Conceptual Location, Character and Extent Review of renovations to Kanawha Plaza, 701 E. Canal Street; UDC No. 2015-03**

I. APPLICANT

Dr. Norman Merrifield, Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities

II. LOCATION

701 E. Canal Street

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 renovations to Kanawha Plaza at 701 E. Canal Street.

IV. SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATION

This project involves the renovation of Kanawha Plaza, a 2.8 acre urban park located downtown on two city blocks surrounded by office towers. This is envisioned as a two-phase project, with Phase 1 including the renovation of the Plaza and fountain to provide a welcome to the visitors attending the World Cycling Championship in September of this year. Phase 2 of the project, which is without a timetable at this point, seeks to enlarge the Plaza by enclosing the two openings over the Downtown Expressway, allowing for construction of permanent restrooms and creating areas for video displays and food service.

At present, Kanawha Plaza is an underutilized, poorly maintained and hard to access public park. Staff supports the concept of renovating the park while maintaining the centerpiece fountain. Staff is very supportive of the collaborative effort to renovate and reinvigorate the park and particularly supports improving visibility into the park and providing a flexible, multi-use space that can accommodate users at any time of the day. Staff finds these aspects crucial to the long-term success of the park renovation.

Equally important to the long-term success of the park is improving access from neighboring streets. The Urban Design Guidelines are not supportive of pedestrian aerial bridges, as they remove valuable street level activity, and while Staff is pleased that the pedestrian bridge is proposed to be removed, it is acknowledged that this bridge does provide the solitary entrance into the park where pedestrians do not have to contend with vehicles. To balance the loss of the bridge, Staff would ask the applicant to work with the Department of Public Works to ensure that every pedestrian crossing to the park contains a pedestrian countdown signal, preferably with an audio component, and ladder-style crosswalks. At the corner of S. 7th and E. Canal streets, where the westbound traffic is split into two sections (those continuing west on Canal and those entering the Downtown Expressway), it appears that there is an opportunity to create a

curbed pedestrian refuge as has been created at the corner of S. 9th and E. Canal Streets. Again, Staff would ask the applicant to consult with the Department of Public Works to incorporate such a feature into the overall plans for the site.

Staff is not supportive of the proposal to remove the sidewalk on the northwestern side of the site in order to provide off-street parking, and would prefer that the applicant work with the Department of Public Works to provide on-street parking along the S. 7th Street frontage of the park. The block of S. 7th Street to the north of the park contains 2-hour on-street parking except during morning and afternoon rush hours, and it appears that may be a possibility alongside the park. 7th street is an important connection to the riverfront, and the removal of sidewalk and introduction of curb cuts for off-street parking creates an undesirable impediment to pedestrian circulation.

Staff also has concerns with the proposal to remove all of the existing vegetation through regrading. To Staff's untrained eye, much of the existing vegetation appears healthy and provides significant shade to the site. In the absence of a tree survey and grading plan, it is impossible for Staff to determine if there are opportunities for retaining healthy trees. Staff finds that a renovated park with retained mature vegetation is much more inviting than an urban park that has been denuded of its shade trees.

Staff also has concerns regarding the proposal to utilize synthetic turf for a large portion of the park. In Staff's brief research, it appears that synthetic turf has been utilized in parks in other cities, but primarily for athletic and playing fields. It appears that synthetic turf fields absorb heat from the sun and get hotter than natural grass. In addition, there may be environmental benefits of natural turf fields, such as its ability to absorb and filter rainwater and pollutants, and to decrease the impact of the urban heat island effect.

Staff is supportive of the location of a splash pad on the site, but finds that the location of the splash pad at the corner of S. 9th and E. Canal Streets, separated from multiple lanes of vehicular traffic by only metal fence and a narrow sidewalk, to be poorly considered. In Staff's opinion, an amenity such as this, which should attract children to play, should be sited more to the interior of the park.

Staff acknowledges that these plans are still in a conceptual stage, and the aforementioned concerns should not be seen as impediments, but rather as opportunities to further enhance the renovation of the park. Staff finds that the proposal is consistent with the recommendations of the Downtown Master Plan and generally consistent with the recommendations of the Urban Design Guidelines. Therefore, it is Staff's position that the Urban Design Committee should recommend that the Planning Commission grant conceptual approval with the following conditions.

- That the final plans include representative renderings of key areas of the park.
- That the final plans include a tree survey for the park and the adjacent street trees indicating tree species, caliper size, health and whether or not it is to be removed.
- That the final plans include a grading plan.
- That the applicant endeavors to retain as many existing healthy trees as possible, or phase the replacement of trees over multiple years.
- That the final plans include a landscape plan and schedule to include plant species, location, quantity, and size at the time of installation.
- That the final plans include the planting of street trees on all park frontages where appropriate.

- That the applicant considers alternate locations for the splash pad that are more interior to the site.
- That the applicant's report provides the rationale for using synthetic turf instead of grass, and provides examples of other urban parks (not athletic or playing fields) where this surface has been utilized successfully.
- That prior to final consideration the applicant works with the Department of Public Works to ensure that every pedestrian crossing to the park contains a pedestrian countdown signal, preferably with an audio component, and ladder-style crosswalks.
- That prior to final consideration, the applicant works with the Department of Public Works to explore the opportunity of creating a curbed pedestrian refuge at S. 7th and Canal Streets as has been created at the corner of S. 9th and E. Canal Street, and to incorporate such a feature into the overall plans for the site if it is deemed a possibility.
- That prior to final consideration, the applicant works with the Department of Public Works to explore the opportunity of creating curb extensions at the adjacent street intersections that lead into the park.
- That the applicant confirms with the Department of Public Works that there is sufficient right-of-way for a designated and separate food truck lane.
- That the final plans include details on the proposed lighting, including but not limited to pole and fixture model(s), height, finish, light source and light color temperature.
- That the final plans include a photometric diagram.
- That the final plans include a signage package.
- That the final plans include details on the proposed stage canopies, including but not limited to structural components, materials, dimensions and finishes.
- That the final plans include details on all proposed site amenities, including but not limited to: handrails, fences, moveable furniture, benches, trash cans, bike racks, exercise stations and water fountains.
- That the applicant considers locating a bike rack near the park entrance point at the terminus of S. 8th Street.
- That any Phase 2 improvements are submitted to the UDC for separate review at such time in the future as plans are more defined.

Staff Contact:

Jeff Eastman, (804) 646-6348

V. FINDINGS OF FACT

a. Site Description and Surrounding Context

The subject property, Kanawha Plaza, is an urban park encompassing 2.8 acres on two city blocks, partially located over top of the Downtown Expressway (Interstate 195). Kanawha Plaza is located in the B-4 (Central Business) zoning district and is isolated by roadways: S. 9th Street to the east carries 10 lanes of two-direction traffic; E. Canal Street to the north carries five lanes of two-direction traffic to the east of S. 8th Street (a recent configuration due to the construction of the Gateway Plaza building and the closing of a portion of S. 8th Street) and four lanes of one-way westbound traffic to the west of S. 8th Street; S. 7th Street to the west carries four lanes of one-way northbound traffic, and E. Byrd Street to the south carries four lanes of one-way eastbound traffic. The posted speed limit on each of these streets is 25mph, and there is no on-street parking along of the street frontages of the park.

The former RMA parking deck and plaza (now owned by the City) and the WilliamsMullen law firm headquarters building are located to the east of Kanawha Plaza, the Federal Reserve Bank is located to the south, the Downtown Expressway emerges to the west, and on the north are the Dominion office tower and the under-construction Gateway Plaza, which will be home to the McGuireWoods law firm among other tenants.

Kanawha Plaza was designed by landscape architects Zion & Breen and completed in 1980. Zion & Breen also provided landscape design for the Philip Morris corporate offices and research center in Richmond and is best known for its design of Paley Park in New York City. The park contains open lawn space, small groves of trees, brick walkways, and a large sunken pool fed by a heptagonal stepped fountain that sits at the corner of S. 9th and E. Canal streets. Portions of the park to the east and west over the expressway have been “notched” out so that the expressway is exposed to pedestrians on the S. 7th and S. 9th Street sidewalks, however, walls in the park shield the view of traffic below, attenuate the sound from the expressway and until recently provided built-in seating. The plaza is open at street level but can also be accessed from the Dominion headquarters by way of a pedestrian bridge that crosses over E. Canal Street and terminates in a spiral ramp by the fountain.

b. Scope of Review

The improvements associated with this project are subject to location, character, and extent review as a “park” in accordance with Section 17.07 of the Richmond City Charter.

c. UDC Review History

The UDC reviewed and the Planning Commission approved the design of the park in 1977. Staff was unable to locate any subsequent reviews for the park. In May 2014 the UDC reviewed and the Planning Commission approved plans to renovate the RMA Plaza one block to the east of the subject site.

d. Project Description

This project involves the renovation of Kanawha Plaza, a 2.8 acre urban park located downtown on two city blocks surrounded by office towers. This is envisioned as a two-phase project, with Phase 1 including the renovation of the Plaza and fountain to provide a welcome to the visitors attending the World Cycling Championship in September of this year. Phase 2 of the project, which is without a timetable at this point, seeks to enlarge the Plaza by enclosing the two openings over the Downtown Expressway, allowing for construction of permanent restrooms and creating areas for video displays and food service.

The topography of the interior of the park is fairly level, with several small rises in elevation in the vicinity of the existing tree groupings. The northeastern corner of the park near the fountain is at grade with the street sidewalk, but there is a set of stairs to access the interior of the site. The northwestern and southern edges of the park contain retaining walls elevating the park above the street sidewalk. The only accessible entrances to the park are off S. 9th Street, adjacent to the opening over the Downtown Expressway, and mid-block on E. Canal Street. On the southern edge of the park, the area behind the retaining wall contains trees and groundcover plantings, while at the northwestern edge the area behind the

retaining wall contains an additional wall of angled brick. Just beyond the retaining walls in both of these areas are concrete screen walls. The northeastern corner of the park, in the vicinity of the fountain, is mainly hardscaped with bricks, many containing the names of individual donors, while the remainder of the park is primarily lawn with intersecting brick sidewalks.

Phase 1 of the plans propose to improve visibility and access to the park by removing the concrete screen walls surrounding the plaza. The site will also be re-graded to improve visibility and accessibility. The retaining wall will be kept along E. Byrd Street, but the regrading will allow for the replacement of the existing steps with sloped walkways and access ramps. The existing fountain at the northeast corner of the site will be renovated, while the adjacent grove of trees will be replaced with a splash pad surrounded by a metal fence. In an area at the corner of S. 7th and E. Canal streets that is currently hardscaped with a large section of concrete paver sidewalk interrupted by tree wells (many of which are vacant), the plans call for providing a permanent 9-space parking area that would allow for backstage delivery and artist access as well as for temporary toilet facilities. This parking lot would be served by two curb cuts and would remove the sidewalk along the S. 7th Street side.

On the interior of the site, the Phase 1 plans call for providing space for a permanent concert venue with flexibility for other programs. A main stage with a canopy is proposed near the northwestern corner of the site, and secondary stage with a canopy is proposed towards the southeastern corner of the site. The open lawn space between the stages would be composed of synthetic turf. Due to the proposed grading of the site, all of the existing vegetation interior to the site will be removed. The plans show the provision of shade trees throughout the site, with the exception of in the lawn area and the fountain area. The applicant's report notes that all plant beds will be irrigated. The existing brick pavers imprinted with names of original private donors to Kanawha Plaza will be removed, stockpiled, and re-used at key locations at Plaza entrance points. All level walking paths will be composed of compacted crushed granite, while sloped access entry walks and ramps will be composed of exposed aggregate, stamped concrete, or similar hardscape.

In order to promote everyday use of the park, the Phase 1 plans seek to provide designated curbside parking for food trucks and vendors by striping or placing a mountable curb into the E. Canal Street right-of-way. The plans would also provide areas and furniture for dining. Proposed on the southern side of the site are a sculpture garden and exercise area. Other proposed site provisions include bike racks, water fountains, security cameras, recorded music and Wi-Fi. Improved lighting is proposed throughout the park.

There is a concrete pedestrian bridge connecting the park to the elevated Dominion building plaza. The applicant's report notes that the City owns the pedestrian bridge and that both the City and Dominion desire to remove the bridge.

Phase 1 of the project is estimated to cost between \$3,000,000 and \$5,000,000. The City is partnering with a number of corporate sponsors, including Dominion Resources, who are working collectively to improve Kanawha Plaza. Demolition

work is expected to commence in late May, with construction starting by mid-June of this year.

e. Master Plan

The Downtown Master Plan notes that the plaza “is surrounded by walls, limiting visibility from the street and pedestrian accessibility. As a result, the plaza is vacant most of the time. The park should be cleaned and repaired as necessary and the walls should be removed where structurally feasible to increase the visibility and pedestrian access to the park. Access can also be improved with the use of clearly defined crosswalks and pedestrian signals on the roads adjacent to the park, and by reducing the speed of traffic on the adjacent roadways. Another way to improve accessibility and increase the use of Kanawha Plaza is to develop a portion of the four-acre open space with active uses, such as a civic or office building. Additional foot traffic will improve safety by providing “eyes on the plaza.” The size and character of this proposed building should be determined by the load capacity of the plaza’s platform, as was the case with the RMA parking deck between Ninth and Tenth Streets that spans the Downtown Expressway (page 4.29).

Though not specific to the property, the Plan advocates for the planting of street trees to create desirable addresses and enhance the pedestrian environment (page 4.21).

f. Urban Design Guidelines

The Urban Design Guidelines notes that “successful public parks, 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” (page 9). As to landscaping, the Guidelines state it should “provide a sense of scale and seasonal interest” and should “include diverse plant species, including evergreen, flowering and shade tree species combined with shrubs, ground covers and annual and perennial plantings”. The Guidelines note that “shade trees for pedestrian comfort should be the predominant plant material in an urban setting” (page 10) and that “significant healthy trees should be preserved and maintained”. Lastly, the Guidelines note that “all park projects should include a maintenance plan which addresses all phases of the project, including both landscaping and facilities” (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 Guidelines note that “Public plazas should use landscaping, public art, and historic preservation to create inviting spaces”. Also, “adequate seating, lighting and trash receptacles should be provided in the design of plazas” (page 14). The Guidelines go on to say that “exterior lighting should also avoid light pollution by directing light downward (page 22). The Guidelines state that the Urban Design Committee does not support the use of pedestrian bridges (page 28).

VII. ATTACHMENTS

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