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To: Planning Commission  
From: Urban Design Committee  
Date: November 19, 2018  
RE: **Final location, character and extent review of landscape improvements (Low Line Green), 1701 Dock Street; UDC 2018-43**

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**I. APPLICANT**

Mark Olinger, Department of Planning & Development Review

**II. LOCATION**

1701 Dock Street

**Property Owner:**

City of Richmond Public Utilities and Chesapeake & Ohio Railway (CSX)

**III. PURPOSE**

The application is for final location, character and extent review of landscaping improvements known as the Low Line Green located at 1701 Dock Street.

**IV. SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATION**

This project involves the extensive landscaping of land between Dock Street and the James River and Kanawha Canal. This area also serves as the Virginia Capital Trail head and is located south of the flood wall. Working in collaboration with various City agencies, CSX, the Virginia Capital Trail and other community stakeholders, the project is being brought forth by the Capital Trees group, which is responsible for several beautification efforts in the City. The goal of this project, dubbed the "Low Line Green", is to enhance the area to better foster the exploration of the site's cultural, environmental, and historical significance.

The proposal consists of replacing invasive vegetation with native grasses, programming more open space for passive recreation, horticultural installations to beautify the area around the floodwall, treatment of stormwater runoff, and additionally pedestrian amenities such as lighting and seating.

Staff finds the proposal to be an important step in realizing the Riverfront Plan's goal of activating the James River and Kanawha Canal. Staff further finds that the proposed landscaping and continued access will help to activate the canal by drawing people to the water's edge. Therefore, the Urban Design Committee recommends that the Planning Commission grant final approval with the following conditions:

- That prior to approval, the applicant consult with the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Community Facilities to ensure a maintenance agreement is fully developed prior to construction
- That consideration be given to the historic 17<sup>th</sup> Street connection to the Canal

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## **V. FINDINGS OF FACT**

### **a. Site Description and Surrounding Context**

The project area is bound by Dock Street on the north, S. 18<sup>th</sup> Street on the east, the James River and Kanawha Canal on the south, and S. 17<sup>th</sup> Street on the west, and encompasses a parcel of land that spans the zoning of DCC (Downtown Civic and Cultural District), M-1 (Light Industrial), and M-2 (Heavy Industrial). The southern parcel is owned by the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway (CSX).

The Virginia Capital Trail traverses the City-owned parcel along Dock Street, beside and then under the elevated train trestle, into the south side of the floodwall, terminating at the start of the Canal Walk at Dock and N. 17<sup>th</sup> Streets. The Capital Trail is 52 miles long, linking Jamestown and Richmond, primarily along the Route 5 corridor. The trail enters Downtown Richmond through Rockett's Landing, staying along the river into Great Shiplock Park, and then links to the proposed Low Line Green.

Immediately to the north of the proposed improvements is the floodwall built in 1994.

### **b. Scope of Review**

The project is subject to location, character, and extent review under Section 17.07 of the Richmond City Charter as a "park".

### **c. UDC Review History**

At the regular October 2014 meeting of the Planning Commission, the final location, character, and extent review of landscaping improvements along Dock Street between S. 21<sup>st</sup> Street and Pear Street was approved as part of the consent agenda.

The aforementioned approval was part of a larger initiative known as the Low Line, "The goal of this project, dubbed the "Low Line", is to enhance the linear park through landscaping and maintenance. The overall concept plan for the Low Line envisions (among other improvements) restoring the canal wall, creating a boardwalk along the canal edge, and building a pedestrian bridge over to Chapel Island from S. 21st Street. The work associated to make this vision a reality is detailed and complex and requires the input of numerous stakeholders. As such, Phase 1 of the plan is limited to landscape enhancements with the hope of catalyzing interest and investment in the area. The Urban Design Committee finds the proposal to be an important first step towards realizing the Riverfront Plan's goal of activating the James River and Kanawha Canal. The maintenance work already completed has vastly improved the visibility of the canal, and the proposal will maintain those sight lines from Dock Street and the Capital Trail. The Committee further finds that the proposed landscaping and continued access will help to activate the canal by drawing people to the water's edge." (UDC 2014-36).

In 2007, the UDC reviewed and the Planning Commission approved Section 1 of the Virginia Capital Trail, which traverses the subject property from Great Shiplock Park at Pear Street to the floodwall at N. 17<sup>th</sup> Street.

**d. Project Description**

Capital Trees, a 501(c)3 organization based in Richmond, Virginia, has worked in recent years with City of Richmond officials and staff members to reclaim and enhance 5.5 acres of land along Dock Street and the Virginia Capital Trail. The site, now commonly known as The Low Line, was originally conceived in 2014 and conceptually approved as part of a general master plan by the Urban Design Committee.

Having completed the first phase of work between Great Shiplock Park and 23rd Street, with a total investment of \$1.2 million, Capital Trees has turned its attention to the western end of the site which includes roughly one acre of land bound by the Richmond Floodwall and Kanawha Canal (immediately east of the Canal Walk).

Presently, the Virginia Capital Trail crosses through the site at grade while Interstate 95 and the CSX Viaduct cross overhead. The area is periodically mown by DPW and DPU but otherwise sits idle and undermanaged, with invasive species inhabiting areas beneath the rail viaduct and along the Kanawha canal. A small brick plaza, Capital Trail Signage/monument, pedestrian pole lights and three sculpture installations are sporadically distributed through the site. Stormwater runoff from roadways above is discharged across the compacted site before making its way to the canal and, ultimately, the James River.

Working with representatives from Department of Planning and Development Review and Public Works, as well as stakeholders such as Venture Richmond, CSX, and Virginia Capital Trail Foundation, Capital Trees has developed plans to enhance the project site using public and private funding sources.

The Virginia Capital Trail will remain in place through the site. The existing brick plaza will be removed and rebuilt within the historic alignment of 17th Street. The relocation of the plaza area will simplify pedestrian movement through the Floodwall, thus creating safer transition. The newly configured plaza will also serve as a point of departure for tour groups exploring the site's historical, cultural and environmental significance. Invasive species will be removed from beneath the CSX viaduct and replaced with native grasses. Lawn areas will provide much-needed open space for area residents and employees of nearby businesses while predominantly native horticultural installations improve aesthetics and reduce scale of the looming floodwall. Stormwater runoff from the new plaza and roadways above will be routed to a planted biofilter at the site's low point adjacent to the canal. Pole lights will largely remain in place – at this point in time, we anticipate removal of two poles and possible addition of landscape lighting at/near site furnishings.

The site will be irrigated and maintained by Capital Trees under separate agreement with the City Attorney's office.

Preliminary budgets for the proposed improvements are set at \$1.2 million including maintenance reserves. To date, Capital Trees has raised roughly 40% of the project budget and expects that construction could begin as early as Spring 2019.

Within the project area, there is one owner of record, The City of Richmond; however, CSX Corporation and Virginia Capital Trail Foundation maintain certain property rights within/adjacent to the site.

Capital Trees will play an active role in the ongoing maintenance of this landscape. The group has worked in such capacity at Great Shiplock Park and Low Line Gardens since 2016. A third-party, private contractor will be commissioned and managed by Capital Trees to ensure that plantings are selectively pruned, weeded and adequately watered until establishment.

**e. Master Plan**

The subject area is located in the James River Focus Area, as defined by the 2008 Downtown Master Plan, and is designated as being in the Downtown Natural Area. This designation refers to land “that is untouched by development, and whose ecological features are preserved” (page 3.20).

In reference to the James River and Kanawha Canal, the Plan states that “new interest has been taken in the canals as recreational and historic resources” (page 4.43). “In order to draw more people to the riverfront”, the Plan continues, “visual and physical access to the James River needs to be improved and emphasized. Improving streetscape elements such as street trees, furniture and paving on streets that run perpendicular to the river will serve to both highlight view corridors and create enhanced pedestrian and bicycle access to the water’s edge. Terminating as many streets as possible at river overlooks will create additional views that will invite visitors to explore the open spaces along the river” (4.45).

The Plan also states that “the construction of the Capital Trail along the Kanawha Canal should be used as an opportunity to create a linear park to serve the residents of Shockoe Bottom. A linear park along the Capital Trail would help to provide increased access to the canal and river” (page 4.49).

Richmond’s Riverfront Plan, adopted by the Planning Commission and City Council in 2012, envisions activating the James River and Kanawha Canal by providing a dock and public access to the waterway.

Acquisition of the Norfolk Southern parcel will help upgrade these parcels into a cohesive public landing, providing access downriver to Chapel Island. These parcels were previously occupied by rail and port facilities that witnessed the departure of the Confederate Government, the origin of the Evacuation fire, and arrival of U.S. President Lincoln within the same week in 1865, providing an as yet untapped opportunity for interpretation (Page 60).

The Plan calls for better maintenance of the landscape under the viaduct (page 81). The Plan notes that there are several obstacles to enlivening the canal, including the Federal designation of the canal as a non-navigable waterway, the inoperable Norfolk Southern drawbridge, which is fixed in the lowered position, and the lock gates at Great Shiplock Park, which are non-functional due to sedimentation (page 86).

The Plan does offer that a potential short-term programming adjustment of eliminating the prohibition on the use of non-motorized, personal recreational

watercraft such as canoes and kayaks from the lower canal between 17<sup>th</sup> Street and the locks would provide much-needed activity on an otherwise underutilized stretch of the Riverfront (page 86).

**f. Urban Design Guidelines**

The Urban Design Guidelines note 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”.

As to landscaping, the Guidelines note that “landscaping should provide a sense of scale and seasonal interest”. In addition, “landscape plans should include diverse plant species, including evergreen, flowering and shade tree species combined with shrubs, ground covers and annual and perennial plantings” (page 10). The Guidelines also state that “plant materials should create spaces by providing walls and canopies in outdoor areas” (page 10).

Lastly, the Guidelines note that “Maintenance should be considered when selecting landscaping materials” and that “significantly healthy trees should be preserved and maintained” (page 10).

**VII. ATTACHMENTS**

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