



To: Planning Commission
From: Urban Design Committee
Date: January 4th, 2021
RE: **Final location, character, and extent review of Richmond Public Library – North Avenue Branch Site Improvements; 2901 North Avenue; UDC 2020-20**

I. APPLICANT

Scott Firestine, Director, Richmond Public Libraries

II. LOCATION

2901 North Avenue

Property Owner:

City of Richmond Public Libraries

III. PURPOSE

The application is for final approval of site improvements to Richmond Public Library – North Avenue Branch including new landscaping, hardscape, and signage.

IV. SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATION

The applicant proposes to alter the landscape and hardscape at the Richmond Public Library - North Avenue Branch. Alterations include the removal of non-native plant species and dead or diseased plantings. New native trees, shrubs and grasses will be planted in place of the removed plantings and in addition to the existing plants. The existing landscape beds will be altered with the installation of retention basins and conveyance channels containing ornamental stone to capture stormwater runoff.

The project reduces the amount of impervious surface and non-native species on site, implements low impact design to manage stormwater runoff and serves as an educational resource available at this library branch. The Urban Design Committee recommends that the Planning Commission approve the final design with the following conditions:

- The Eastern Redbud proposed for removal at the north end of the parking lot be reassessed for overall health, and if the tree is found to be healthy it be retained, along with the other existing redbuds in this location, or safely moved to another location on the site using the proper techniques for transplanting.
- To ensure compliance with the Urban Design Guidelines, the applicant confirm with staff that the mature height and spacing of proposed plantings will not interfere with overhead wires and existing lighting.
- If funding is available, the applicant coordinate the reconfiguration of the existing city sidewalk along Essex Street with the City of Richmond's Department of Public Works.

Staff Contact:

Alex Dandridge, (804) 646-6569 // alex.dandridge@richmondgov.com

V. FINDINGS OF FACT**a. Site Description and Surrounding Context**

The site is located in North Richmond just south of the North Avenue and Brookland Park Boulevard intersection. The site is bordered by North Avenue to the west, Essex Street to the south, and a public alley to the east. The property is zoned UB-PE7, Urban Business District-Parking Exempt. The site is approximately 0.60 acres.

b. Scope of Review

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

c. UDC Review History

In 2016, the UDC did a conceptual & final location, character and extent review of the Westover Hills Public Library Sustainable Campus Initiative. The UDC recommended approval of the project.

The UDC has reviewed a number of library renovation projects, many of which include landscaping, over the last few years.

d. Project Description

The applicant proposes to develop a series of retention basins designed to Virginia Department of Environmental Quality standards to infiltrate storm water discharge from the roof, sidewalks, and parking lot; as well as develop an ecologically responsible landscape that can be used as an educational tool.

This project is funded by a 319H grant from the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality and the City of Richmond Department of Public Utilities – Storm water Utility; and supported by staff hours from The James River Association and RVAH2O with service donations from Four Winds Design.

Stormwater runoff and flooding are major issues in this combined sewer district and particularly on Essex Street along the south side of the site. Soil infiltration values are surprisingly good and well-suited to managing runoff on site, although the small size of the property presents a design challenge. No outdoor seating is proposed at this branch location.

North side of the site

- Excavate turf strip on north side of existing parking lot to be concave in form, and soil to be three inches below the pavement, soil will not be disturbed within five feet of existing trees
- One Eastern Redbud tree is proposed for removal; however, the applicant has confirmed that this tree will not be disturbed if it is not damaged or diseased.
- Reduction in impervious surface on the north side of the library where concrete will be removed and native soil will be exposed, existing liriopie will be removed

- Planting of new native trees, shrubs, and grasses in existing beds

West side of the site

- Remove concrete, gravel, and soil to a depth of 36" in the existing, empty tree wells along North Avenue and install engineered soil
- Native trees to be planted in the improved, existing tree wells
- Removal of non-native and diseased shrubs in existing western landscape bed, and replacement with native shrubs and grasses

South side of the site

- Removal of two existing Crape Myrtle trees
- Replacement of existing sidewalk along Essex Street with a new sidewalk in a meandering design
- The new sidewalk will match the existing sidewalk in width and finish, and will include two conveyance channels allowing drainage to pass from the landscape bed into the new retention basins on the south side of the sidewalk. The conveyance channels cutting through the sidewalk will be covered by slip-resistant grates. Although the city sidewalks in this neighborhood are generally straight, following the grid pattern of the streets, the applicant has confirmed that during the community input portion of the project, many comments were received from library staff and citizens stating that this site needed something unique, and the break from rectilinear layout being proposed draws attention to the project for increased educational exposure.
- Installation of an interpretive sign
- Planting of new native trees, shrubs and grasses

East side of the site

- Existing plantings to remain
- Planting of native trees

An interpretive sign will be installed on the west side of the library building and will be 32" tall. The panel will be mounted on a three inch aluminum post. The panel will be 24.50" wide and have smoothed edges for safety.

An irrigation system is to be installed over the entire southern side of the site and up the alley to cover the Redbuds. Mister heads are to be used in all areas, with no throws reaching masonry surfaces. The control is to be located inside of the Library Building.

All trees and shrubs shall conform to the most recent edition of The American Standards for Nursery Stock. No plants are to be stored on site for longer than 48 hours, and all stored plants must be kept in full shade and watered daily.

All planting beds shall be treated with three to four inches of hardwood double shredded mulch dyed brown. Compost or a bedding mix shall be tilled into the soil a depth of 4" in all planting areas except where soil is to be removed. Finished grade of all topsoil shall be 3" below hardscape elevations.

Construction is tentatively scheduled to begin in March and April of 2021. Demolition and site infrastructure, large tree plantings, proposed parking lot

curbs, arrival court and associated features, and retention basins will all be accomplished with an independent contractor. Volunteers will be used for shrub and perennial planting, mulching, and clean-up.

All maintenance of RPL properties is performed by an independent contractor managed by RPL staff. The site improvements at Westover Hills Branch Library, which were completed in phases from 2014-2019, have served as maintenance testing grounds and pilot project.

e. Master Plan

The project site is located in the North Planning District, which is identified by the City of Richmond's current Master Plan. Although the Richmond Public Library - North Avenue Branch is not specifically mentioned in the Master Plan, the plan states that the City will retain its eight library branches and focus on internal improvements in regard to current technologies to serve the needs of the surrounding communities, and that the library branches should include special programming, exhibits, and lectures to increase its role as a community resource.

f. Urban Design Guidelines

The guidelines state that, "*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.*" (pg. 10) The plan proposes a variety of native species including large trees, shrubs and bushes, and ground covers. The "Bee Zones" will include a variety of herbaceous perennial plantings.

The Urban Design Guidelines recommend that "*Plant materials should be adaptable to existing soils, climatic and lighting conditions, and be disease resistant. Native plant species are encouraged, but not required.*" (pg. 10) The project proposes a variety of native species. The Applicant has stated that the soil at each site has been studied to determine type and quality, which has informed the selection of native plantings at each project site.

The guidelines state that "*Maintenance should be considered when selecting landscaping materials. Significant healthy trees should be preserved and maintained. Trees on public and private property should be appropriately trimmed around utility lines. Hazardous dead or dying trees on City-owned property should be removed and replaced.*" (pg. 11) One Eastern Redbud tree is being proposed for removal; however, after speaking to citizens and the project applicant, it has been determined that this tree is in good health and can be retained.

Regarding green infrastructure, the guidelines state that "*Site development should take measures towards conservation of natural resources. Where feasible, developments should also promote impact minimization techniques through alternative storm water management practices.*" (pg. 11) The purpose of the project is to re-engineer the landscaping of the Richmond Public Library - Broad Rock Branch to include green infrastructure such as retention basins, rain gardens, swales, and native plantings, as means of managing stormwater runoff on site.

The guidelines state that, *“Street tree species should be selected for performance in urban situations. For example, the root structure should be conducive to urban conditions. The height of the tree at maturity should respect any overhead utility lines. The tree's branching tendency and leaf size should be considered. Tree species that drop berries or fruit or have thorns are generally not recommended.”* (pg.21) Staff finds there are native trees that produce acorns/ fruits, and that grow to a mature height that could impact existing lighting and overhead utility wires being proposed within the scope of this project. Staff recommends that the applicant submit a final planting plan that replaces any acorn/ fruit bearing trees located in parking lots and along the sidewalk and street with native trees that are not acorn/ fruit bearing, and are spaced appropriately as to not impact existing lighting.

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