Urban Design Review Board

MINUTES

Thursday, November 15, 2018

Pre-Meeting: 2:30 PM, 11th Floor – Central Conference Room
Regular Meeting:
3:00 PM, Room H13 – Harney Level
Omaha/Douglas Civic Center
1819 Farnam Street

Meeting Minutes: This document states the minutes of cases before the Urban Design Review Board at their Public hearing and Administrative meeting held on Thursday, November 15, 2018.

Certification of Publication: Urban Design Review Board Administrator certifies publication of this agenda in the Daily Record, the official newspaper of the City of Omaha on Monday, November 5, 2018.

Members Present: Jeffrey Elliott – Chair
Robert Peters – Vice-Chair
Kurt Cisar
Kristine Karnes
Michael Riedmann
Matthew Schafer
Philip Webb

Members Not Present: Jay Noddle
Katie Underwood
Dawaune Hayes

Staff Present: Jed Moulton – UDRB Manager
Tim Fries, UDRB Administrator
Alan Thelen, City Law Department
Clinette Ingram, Recording Secretary
Lisa Agans, Recording Secretary

Public Projects:

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<th>Name:</th>
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<td>OJB Landscape Architecture</td>
<td>Omaha Riverfront Revitalization</td>
<td>Gene Leahy Mall/Heartland of America Park/Lewis and Clark Landing</td>
<td>Overview of Riverfront Revitalization Project</td>
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<td>Nathan Elliott</td>
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At the Urban Design Review Board (UDRB) meeting held on November 15, 2018, Nathan Elliott appeared before the Board. Jed Moulton appeared on behalf of the City.

Mr. Elliott delivered a presentation about the Master Plan to what he described as a very large and complicated project. He stated that the project is in the concept design phase. The applicant has been working with various departments within the City of Omaha and the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers. Demolition for the western portion of Gene Leahy mall is planned for spring of 2019 with an estimated opening date of April 2021; the Heartland of America Park will close late winter/early spring of 2020 with an estimated opening date for the entire park in March 2024; and depending on scheduling Lewis & Clark Landing is scheduled to close as early as 2020 or as late as 2021 with an estimated opening date of March 2023. The Metropolitan Entertainment & Convention Authority (MECA) would be the owner/operator. The project would cost approximately $300 million dollars and would cover approximately 100 acres. The site would be used for civic events and for the enjoyment of the general public.

Gene Leahy Mall (from 13th Street to 8th Street) would be broken into two areas: Gene Leahy Mall West and Gene Leahy Mall East. This portion of the project would include curbside and possibly streetscape improvements. A lakefront renovation is planned for the Heartland of America Park portion of the project which begins at 8th Street. Also included would be public open space improvements along the rail line and down to the rail bridge.

Mr. Elliott explained that the project would include possibly a dozen development packages. He provided a preliminary schedule with approximate dates that would be later be adjusted based on the 10% drawings. He displayed some conceptual renderings and mentioned several proposed improvements that are included in the plans. Near 13th Street just south of the Holland Center some of the proposed plans for the site include: an urban street plaza, a sculpture garden, a dog’s area, a children’s play area, a restaurant, a performance pavilion, a water feature plaza and restrooms. The bridge on 13th Street will be removed and filled in as part of the park renovation. A public promenade is planned for 11th Street between Douglas Street and Farnam Street. The existing slides on the east end of the Gene Leahy Mall will remain with some amenities that will be added to enhance the space. An interactive water feature will be built near the slides along with a viewing pond. 10th Street will remain intact with the park continuing underneath it. In the area near 10th Street a new café with a cove concept is proposed, a children’s boat launch, a smaller even lawn between 8th and 9th Streets, and a platform and upper plaza near 9th Street. Mr. Elliott stated that the board would be able to review and provide input for the streetscape spaces, the performance pavilion, the restaurant and café.

Mr. Elliott discussed the proposed improvements for Heartland of America Park that include the following: an activated street plaza along 8th Street, space for food trucks, and a park building along the northern edge of the site which will house park administration offices and a community room/event space large enough to house events for 250 to 300 attendees, a smaller meeting place, and a small event lawn overlooking the ice & roller blade ribbon. He stated that there will be an extension of Farnam Street which will terminate in an overlook. There will be a larger lawn for concert events or festivals, botanical gardens, and a space for passive recreation. Mr. Elliott pointed out an area which will be built over the railroad tracks and a ground level promenade which becomes an elevated promenade once you reach the overlook. The lower edge of the lake will be closed and an amphitheater will be added, the gondola space will be retained and vertical circulation including stairs and ADA accessible modes of making the 24’ transition from the upper parks down to the lake. Mr. Elliott stated that the public spaces will be primarily along the south, west, and east sides of the park. Along the
Douglas Street extension the area will be more service oriented, housing buildings for skate rental, storage of the chiller for the ice rink and other maintenance and service areas.

Mr. Elliott stated that this is only the current plan, it is continuing to evolve. He stated that they are proposing to raise the elevation along 8th Street to create a view from the street down to the river. Douglas Street will be extended to connect with Riverfront Drive which will be realigned as well. Mr. Elliott then went over a conceptual rendering showing how the redesigned area will flow from east to west.

In response to a question from Ms. Karnes, Mr. Elliott explained that in order to expand access to the riverfront, they will build over the railroad tracks and will include renovation of the floodwall in order to integrate the new construction into the previously existing floodwall. He explained that there will be enough clearance for the trains to pass under, and still provide a continuation of the riverfront for the public to the overlook. Mr. Elliott explained that this will be an over build or “cap”, not a tunnel which has much different requirements.

Mr. Elliott stated that the current lift station may be relocated due to some legacy issues at its current location. He stated that they are working through issues with the Corp of Engineers on the issue of the lift station and the promenade design which will be a transition area from the park to the trail system and possibly other areas.

Mr. Elliott next explained the plans for the Lewis & Clark Landing. While discussing the boundaries of the area, Mr. Elliott explained that there is contaminated soil present in a few areas currently being capped by a synthetic liner or concrete. He explained that Riverfront Drive will be shifted over approximately 60 to 70 feet in order to create more area for a planned Children’s discovery area including a science museum which is not being developed by this developer but they are including the area in the rendering for clarity. This developer’s work will include realigning the street and related civic improvements, an approximately 80,000 square foot children’s play area, as well as some sports and recreation amenities and parking areas. The former restaurant site is likely to be developed as a pavilion which could house food trucks and an event lawn, sand volleyball, beach areas. On the west side of Riverfront Drive soil will be added to passively extend the play landscape, as well as overflow parking and a movement or skate park. The existing City maintenance facility will remain in place though there will likely be some landscape improvements in the same area including planting a buffer along the edge. Options are being explored to potentially reconfiguring the NPS parking lot for additional capacity. Flood wall improvements such as steps and seating are also being planned to create a river front overlook. In addition, the development will include the realignment of the last leg of the MLK Bridge to create more space for the recreation programs and parking. There will be no work done on the marina. Mr. Elliott went over the conceptual rendering showing the overall anticipated development at the Lewis & Clark Landing.

Mr. Peters inquired about the planned phasing of the park closures/openings. Mr. Elliott explained that at this point demolition of the western portion of Gene Leahy mall is planned for spring of 2019 with an estimated opening date of April 2021; the Heartland of America Park will close late winter/early spring of 2020 with an estimated opening date for the entire park in March 2024; and depending on scheduling Lewis & Clark Landing is scheduled to close as early as 2020 or as late as 2021 with an estimated opening date of March 2023. A diagram showing the proposed timeline of development was provided to the Board members. He stated that when the Gene Leahy Mall closes, the public sidewalks and existing parking will remain intact and the construction fence will be placed behind the sidewalk. Mr. Elliott
stated that this is a very preliminary plan, it is possible it will change as the project gets further along past the conceptual phase. The planned street realignments will likely be done in stages and will be worked out with the Public Works department. Mr. Peters sought clarification that the majority of the open space in the downtown area would be closed. Mr. Elliott stated that there would be some open space between the phases, but that there would be a time when all of the open space would be unavailable for use during construction.

Mr. Webb inquired about the scale of events and how can they determine the way people congregate in order to decide what type of amenities should be present in a massive project such as the one being proposed. Mr. Elliott stated that the hallmark of these type of projects is that they generally work with the City or other entity to schedule an active calendar to bring people in. Some examples he listed were free concerts, exercise classes, lunch time Zumba classes, dances in evenings; he stated that these type of activities draw people into the park at which time they are able to see what the other opportunities are present. He also pointed out that the project will increase the connectivity and livability of the space which will make it more attractive to people who may wish to visit.

Mr. Elliott also stated that Council Bluffs intends to add dynamic programs to the Rivers Edge Park which will include an events pavilion. In addition, they will be creating constructive wetlands, habitat restoration, creating a children’s garden and some other passive features such as overlooks and tree top walks. The plans for the area include provisions for people to access some of the programs and nature areas even if there is some flooding, through tree top canopies and walk ways from the top of the levy. Mr. Elliott, in response to a question from the Board, stated that there will be a possibility that some events will take place on the Great Lawn at Rivers Edge Park and there may be opportunity for parts of that area to be rented for events. There will be no changes to Tom Hanafan Park, improvements will be made mostly north and south of there.

In response to a question from Mr. Cisar, Mr. Elliott stated that 90% plans for the demolition of Gene Leahy West, from 10th to 14th Street would be going out to the City after the holidays. Once the City has those, the agreement between the City and MECA needs to be finalized so that a contractor can be engaged and work can be advertised. Tentatively, the plan is to begin work in March when the park will be completely closed off and Gene Leahy west will be filled in first and then there will be 30%, 60%, 90% milestones through 2019. Mr. Elliott referred to a scheduling graph which was provided to the Board members. He stated that they anticipate permitting for Gene Leahy west to begin by the end of the year. Sometime mid-year, demolition drawings for Gene Leahy east will begin so the contractor can begin demolition and fill on the east side as they complete their work on the west side. He stated that they are attempting to break the project up into small, manageable parts so that there can be rolling openings throughout the parks.

Mr. Schafer inquired whether the project was something that, due to its size, would “loose its luster” by the time the residential developments could fill in near that area, and whether it would draw people in from outside the area. Mr. Elliott stated that there are also some residential development projects coming down the pipeline for near the same time that this project will be in progress. Mr. Elliott stated that this would be the 2nd largest open space improvement project in the country. He stated that one of the goals is economic development, and he knows from experience with this type of project in the last 10 years, if you build properly managed, highly active, and programmed public open space, people want to be near it. He stated that the downtown area offers a wide mix of retail, office, entertainment, and residential development, in addition to this new open space development. He stated that in his experience, diverse areas such as this can draw people in from 75 to 100 miles away for both daytime
activities and evening/weekend programming.

Mr. Elliott explained that the existing water in the Gene Leahy mall is not jurisdictional, it is a constructed feature. He stated that there are some small wetlands which meet the explicit definition from the Corp of Engineers, but due to their size and scope it is unlikely that they will cause any permitting issues.

In response to a question from the Board, Mr. Elliott explained that they had developed the programming plans after receiving input from public meetings on both sides of the river as well as input from the public regarding what they would like to see. In addition, during the past 18 months, there have been meetings with City officials, especially the Parks & Planning departments, as well as donors and civic and business leaders and taken that information combined with the public input to come up with the current plan. Mr. Elliott stated that they feel they have the bones of the plan and now have to work that through the financing and scheduling process. He stated that there have also been two additional Public Works meetings to work out more of the details. He stated that there will be public notices sent out regarding Corps related matters. In addition, Mr. Elliott explained that once construction starts there will be a huge, public messaging campaign which is being worked out between MECA & the City and will be supported by the developer.

Mr. Schafer asked about how far the developer had gotten in discussions with both the Corps of Engineers and the Railroad. Mr. Elliott responded that there have been several meetings with the Corps of Engineers which have not brought up any major problems. He stated that they are in the process of working on an 1156 financing program with the Corps of Engineers which got off to a rocky start, but now appears to be going forward in a positive manner, thanks in part to input and help they have received from the City in the process. HDR is also working on issues with the flow analysis throughout the project.

In response to a question from the Board regarding anticipated streetscape improvements, Mr. Elliott advised that they are working with the Parks department to have a tree analysis completed with the goal being to preserve as many significant trees as possible, though several are in bad condition. He stated that the developer does have expertise with transplanting large specimen trees (20 to 30 foot root balls) either on a crane or airbags. They are trying to balance out the need to maintain the existing fabric of the park with the need to create new, comfortable, pedestrian realms. He stated that it is anticipated that their streetscape improvements will be in excess of the City requirements. Mr. Elliott advised that they are trying to not disturb any signals or lights if possible while providing a comfortable, humane and detail rich streetscape within the park. He stated that they are interested in getting to the other side also, doing various improvements “building face to building face” all along the project if the budget will permit. A work session was scheduled to go over the preliminary concept plans with the City in December and by the time they get to the 30% time table, he anticipates many of the individual questions and issues with the streetscape will have been worked out.

The Board had several questions about the fate of the Lawrence Halperin legacy lights. He stated that the orange fixtures will be salvaged and reinvented somewhere on the site. He stated that there are less than two dozen. A definite plan has not been worked out, but they will be preserved.

Mr. Elliott stated that at this point, none of the buildings in the project have reached anything past the conceptual phase. He stated that by the 30% stage they will have something more definite to show. Some of the buildings will be public buildings which will be owned by the City and possibly leased out,
but that is also still in the conceptual stage. The pavilions and restrooms will all be public buildings owned by the City.

Mr. Peters stated that they appreciated the information presented and stated that he believed a review at the 30% stage.

Mr. Cisar moved to approve the scope of work presented at this meeting, in anticipation of a 30% design review that will be forthcoming for each design phase. Mr. Webb seconded the motion which carried 6-0.

Discussion Item:

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<th>City of Omaha Planning Department</th>
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<th>Review of Apartment Design</th>
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At the Urban Design Review Board (UDRB) meeting held on November 15, 2018, Mr. Jed Moulton, City Planning Department, presented a review of prevailing buildings designs in the past 10 years. He stated that the Urban Design code was originally drafted to address the design of “big-box” retail stores, and has been amended, through amendments, to include the apartment buildings which are more commonly being built now. He stated that this review of 27 will be to discuss how we are doing, and any changes that still need to be made to make the code more in line with what is coming before the Board now. Building orientation, setbacks, and transparency at the street level are some of the principle variables left to the review of the Board. Building design has a number of variables, including materials used, elevations, and continuity of design throughout the exterior of the building.

Mr. Moulton handed out a sheet for the Board to make notations about what could be done better on the projects presented and what was done well on those projects. Mr. Moulton then presented several representative apartment building projects throughout the City, from the past 10 years, which featured a variety of design aspects and challenges.

The Board discussed the pros and cons of the designs which had been presented by Mr. Moulton as well as discussing changes that could perhaps be made in order to make the process better in the future.

Adjournment:

It was the consensus of the Board to adjourn the meeting at 4:57 p.m.

Clinette Ingram & Lisa Agans
Recording Secretary

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Jeffrey Elliott, UDRB Chairman

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Lisa Agans, Recording Secretary

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Date Approved