Pre-Meeting minutes

At the pre-meeting of the Urban Design Review Board, held on June 18, 2020, the Board and City staff briefly discussed the agenda item which had been laid over from the May 21, 2020 meeting. Mr. Tim Fries, Urban Design Review Board Administrator, pointed out areas of the site plan which had been changed since the layover and others which had remained the same.

The Board discussed what their role in the process should be with regards to projects which come before the board, specifically regarding the boundaries of their authority to require revisions and to deny approval of various projects. Additionally, they discussed specific concerns regarding the design of the Discovery Center building as well as their frustration that it did not appear their concerns from the May 21, 2020 meeting had been addressed in the revised plans being presented at the June 18, 2020 meeting.
The pre-meeting adjourned at approximately 3:00 p.m.

**PUBLIC MEETING:**

Mr. Peters called the public meeting to order at 3:12 p.m.

**Administrative Items:**

**Approval of the May 21, 2020 Urban Design Review Board Meeting minutes**

Mr. Schafer moved to adopt the minutes of the May 21, 2020 Urban Design Review Board Meeting as submitted. Mr. Cisar seconded the motion which carried 5-0.

AYES: Peters, Cisar, Schafer, Marek, Hayes

**Public Projects:**

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<th>Name:</th>
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<td>John Dineen</td>
<td>Location:</td>
<td>Omaha Riverfront</td>
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<td>HDR</td>
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At the Urban Design Review Board meeting held June 18, 2020, Mr. John Dineen of HDR introduced Ms. Sue Morris, President of Heritage Services, 10050 Regency, to discuss the research which had been completed in order to determine the scope and focus of the project as well as the interior and exterior design. Ms. Morris explained that Heritage Services has provided over $1,000,000,000 in treasures to the Omaha Community primarily with philanthropic dollars but also partnering with the City of Omaha on public/private projects. She advised that some of the projects they have created were the Joslyn Museum, Durham Museum, and the Strategic Air Command Museum. Ms. Morris provided some background regarding the research the group had done into the creation of the Discovery Center including several visits to similar S.T.E.M. (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) focused projects such as the Exploratorium in San Francisco. She also provided a slide show for the Board members to view showing some of the exhibits at the Exploratorium which were factors in the design of the Discovery Center. Ms. Morris described the project as being educational while also being fun and entertaining as the result of several interactive exhibits designed to draw and hold the attention of the child while exhibiting functions of S.T.E.M.

Ms. Morris stated that the group had followed three basic guiding principles for decision making with the project. She advised that these guiding principles help them in deciding where the best focus should be in terms of dollars spent, since there is not an unlimited budget, in order to produce the best possible facility and visitor experience. Ms. Morris explained that this will be approximately an $11,000,000 project and that it will be funded entirely by philanthropic dollars so it is important to them to be sure the money is well spent. Those guiding principles are:

1. The connection to S.T.E.M.
   a. She explained that this is more than just going to work for a day with Dad. This is a
connection to inspire children to explore interests in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics who may not have otherwise felt that connection.

2. Joyful engagement
   a. Ms. Morris explained that this project was not to be just a classroom on the riverfront; it is to be an environment that is about entertainment. She added that it could be a premier location for people to rent for weddings or corporate events at the riverfront.

3. Resilient operation
   a. They look at whether the project is sustainable. They look at things like whether it will be project financially feasible and can it be sustained without creating a financial crisis down the road.
   b. They look around to make sure they are not competing with other experiences and businesses in the area. She explained that this is not like the Durham Museum of History, it is not the Children’s Museum which focuses on children up to age 5. It is anticipated that the Discovery Center will be used by children who have at least been to kindergarten up through at least elementary school. She added that there will be exhibits, music, and art which will be entertaining for entire families; however, the focus will be on these children.

Mr. Chad Biesen, Construction Manager at Heritage Services, appeared before the Board to discuss the pre-construction research they had completed for the project. Mr. Biesen stated that in 21 months they had travelled to several locations from Boston, MA to San Francisco, CA, looking for the best S.T.E.M. ideas that they could bring to this project. Specifically, he stated that they had been, and still are, researching programming ideas as well as exhibition concepts which could be brought into this project for Omaha. He added that during that time they had also evaluated six different site locations in Omaha before deciding on the riverfront location.

Mr. John Dineen introduced Mr. Mark Hamilton as an architect working with the team on design of the Discovery Center; he stated for the Board the resume of Mr. Hamilton including numerous teaching appointments and other projects he had worked on.

Mr. Mark Hamilton, spoke about the process that had gone into the overall design of the building. He stated that the first thing they had looked at was site location relative to the surrounding highway and street layout as well as its proximity to downtown played a role in the orientation and design of the building. He stated that the intention was to draw people to the site from downtown and the surrounding parks, as well as making it visible from the freeway. Mr. Hamilton stated that this is what drove the design as well as the articulation of the building; additionally, the shift in the floor plan allows the building to draw people in from the parks and downtown areas surrounding it by providing an interesting focal point from those locations as well as providing the maximum amount of programming on the first floor. In addition, the overhang to the west leads directly to the children’s play area. Mr. Hamilton pointed out how the landscaping and building articulation has been designed in a way to be cognizant of the human pedestrian activity in and around the building.

Mr. Hamilton stated that the skin of the building was designed to allow maximum visual porosity from the inside of the building to the outside of the building. In addition, the design team wanted to be sure the pedestrians would be able to view into the building to see some of the opportunities and programming available. In addition, the large façade will allow for the display of local art and allow it to function as a backdrop for festivals and other activities which may take place along the riverfront. Mr. Hamilton provided several slides showing different elevations of the building, as well as from different surrounding
areas such as the I-480 Bridge and the Bob Kerrey pedestrian bridge, and described some of the building materials and their functions utilized. He stated that the intention of the design and choice of materials was to insure that the building had the kind of presence to make it an iconic part of the Omaha downtown skyline.

Ms. Morris stated that this building will be 82,000 square feet on two floors. In comparison, Ms. Morris stated that other projects they had worked on were significantly larger. The Air and Space Museum is 330,000 square feet; the Joslyn Museum is 140,000 square feet; the Holland Center for Performing Arts is 190,000 square feet. She stated that initially they had wanted to design a single level building; however, finding a good location which would provide sufficient space to do so proved impossible. Ultimately, in order to accommodate the geometric dome and other features, it was determined that a two story building would be necessary. Ms. Morris stated that it is challenging too look at a building when there is nothing inside and to see what it will truly look like; she stated that the team is committed to providing a building which will draw people into it to see the features inside by doing things like providing the skin which is somewhat transparent.

Mr. Hamilton shared photographs which showed areas along the east façade at the pedestrian level where the envelope folds away from the building so that pedestrians can actually walk through the building as well as making space right outside the café area. In addition, along the ground floor at the pedestrian level, the series of vertical fins will break up the direct sunlight going into the building while at the same time providing views from the inside out to the river and from the river into the building. Mr. Hamilton pointed out that the repetition also serves to break down the scale of the building to the pedestrian level while giving great views of all the activity going on inside the building which will enhance the boardwalk experience from between the grove of trees to the building to the west, the river to the east and the view to the exhibits and activities inside the building.

In response to questions from the Board, Mr. Hamilton stated that the boardwalk is 15’ wide; the building sits back 3’ from the boardwalk with a landscape buffer in between there. Mr. Dineen pointed out that the boardwalk is a separate piece of property.

Mr. Hamilton showed how the exterior façade could be utilized to project images, lights, and other artistic elements. He provided a visual showing lights moving within that façade giving an idea of how that could work to bring an additional interesting aspect to the design. Ms. Morris also pointed out that it will also be a canvas for education. She stated that there could be an opportunity for an electrical engineer to use it for high school and college students interested in electrical engineering. She stated that they had had conversations with approximately 50 to 75 educators within the Omaha community who were excited about this opportunity and had an opportunity to give some of their input into what they would want to see in the project.

Mr. Jed Moulton, Urban Design Planning Manager, discussed the department recommendations. He stated that there were some minor issues with the loading area, dumpster location, and landscaping. Mr. Moulton stated that if there is a waiver, they would appreciate the Board supporting those waivers as they related to zoning for those items which had been requested by the department. Mr. Moulton commended the applicant on providing the requested improved images to the Board at the meeting and stated the additional transparency was not clearly apparent in the images, but the addition was part of what the Board had been concerned about at the last meeting. Mr. Moulton stated that the Planning Department recommended approval and requested Board support of the landscaping waiver in the recommendation report.
Mr. Bob Peters clarified that the recommendation report called for approval of the preliminary plans which indicated that this meeting was being considered the first review. Mr. Moulton stated that was correct. Mr. Peters asked what further reviews would be involved with the project. Mr. Moulton advised that following the preliminary review, there would be a final review prior to bidding, and at 95%. He stated that this was to track the progress and to insure that there were no substantial changes made to the approved plans. Mr. Moulton also pointed out that the policies of the Urban Design Review Board also granted the Board the authority to grant administrative disposition to the Department for any of the review stages. Mr. Peters asked whether there would be anything that would prohibit the applicant from coming back before the final plan stage if they make changes to the plans which need approval from the Board. Mr. Moulton stated that there was nothing to prevent the Board or the applicant from asking for interim reviews.

Mr. Matt Shafer stated that he appreciated the additional visual information provided at the meeting. He felt that this is a vital project for the City and wanted to be sure they got it right. Mr. Shafer stated that his concern remains about the size of the building and how that relates to the human scale; he would also like to see the orientation of the building change so that it is facing the people who are coming into the building see the canopy rather than the long plain façade. Mr. Hamilton stated that the west side of the building, coming from the parking lot and Riverside Drive has the cantilever which will collect people from the parking lot and also provide them shelter; as will the overhang on the south. He stated that the overhangs in those areas were designed to draw people to collect in those areas by providing a little shelter from the sun and providing a large open area to gather. Mr. Shafer stated that the overhang is nice; however, he still feels that the interesting piece of the architecture is facing away from where the people will be coming up to the building.

Mr. Hayes asked what the process was that the team used to engage with educators and how it was determined that this type of programming was needed. Ms. Morris explained that in the region there is a STEM coordinator, Julie Sigmond (sp), who is housed at the Henry Doorly Zoo. She advised that this programming and resources are funded by all of the school districts in the region. Ms. Morris stated that Ms. Sigmond has been asking for an additional resource which would address physical science rather than the natural science which is the focus at the zoo. She advised that they always start projects by talking with people who would use the building. When her team developed the Holland Center, they began by meeting with the symphony, the opera, dance studios and other performing arts representatives. Ms. Morris stated that, even before deciding they would do the project, they had met with the superintendent of schools as well as Dr. Derek Nero from UNO who recognized that there was a challenge in engineering education. Representatives from many area schools were brought together and then eventually the group was condensed to a smaller Education Advisory Group who met with the designers frequently and went with her to the Exploratorium to gather information and ideas from those designers. She stated that they wanted to be sure they were developing a project which will be something the educators will want to use while also making it a fun experience for both the teachers and the students. Ms. Morris informed the Board that this Advisory Group will remain a part of the project helping to develop the programming and other aspects of the center. In response to a question from Mr. Cisar, Ms. Morris advised that the Advisory Group was involved in choosing the location of the building and about the exterior of the building as well as the interior and features that will be housed within the building. She stated that one of the first questions the group asked was, “Are you going to want to go there? Would you rather go to the Riverfront or to a site out on Exit 426?” Currently there is a science museum in Aurora, Nebraska which educators in Omaha are driving their students to for science education classes.
Ms. Morris addressed concerns that Mr. Shafer had raised concerning the west side of the building which is fairly plain. She stated that this will be a place for busses to pull up and drop off students and they felt that the canopy overhead would provide a good place for them, and other guests, to get together as a group before going into the building. She also pointed out that you need a pretty long drive approach for as many buses as they anticipate being present at the building. Mr. Peters likened it to the platform you see at a train station or other place dropping off large quantities of people.

Mr. Peters asked how the actual site is contributing to the location of the building as well as part of the design. He stated that although to a casual observer it looks like a flat plane of land, he knows that it has some problem areas underground that the architects are having to consider with regards to building style. Mr. Biesen advised that they have done a lot of research on the “burrito” underground and it has partially driven their design regarding any underground installations. Mr. Dineen clarified by pointing out on a diagram the location of the “burrito”. He explained that everything east of the area of the steps at the Riverfront development has a large amount of contaminants in the soil which were wrapped up, sealed, and covered with an “environmental cap” cannot be disturbed. There are also other areas to the north, east, and south which have problems make underground structures undesirable or impossible, those areas will have aboveground features such as pedestrian walks and play areas. Next, Mr. Dineen pointed out another area which is controlled by the Army Corps of Engineers for flood control, which also cannot be disturbed.

Mr. Cisar stated that he liked the use of the word “canvas” to describe the building, but he realizes as an architect that a canvas can have both good and bad connotations. He stated that he appreciated seeing the movement along the exterior of the building as a person walks or drives by it because he feels that it is important to have that movement to break up the size of the building. He asked the design team to please describe some of the permanent interior architecture, he wanted to know about what structural elements inside the building would be visible to the exterior through the transparent façade. Ms. Morris stated that some of that interior structure is still in the discussion phase. She stated that they want the building to be very flexible as a “container” for the exhibits and programming features inside the building. Some of the structural features will depend on budget. They are anticipating some sort of geometric feature and a tower which, while structural, will also serve as an educational piece with regards to mathematics and engineering. An example of construction exhibits Ms. Morris mentioned was at the Ford Museum in Detroit which now features an automobile which can be dismantled and re-assembled by the students to show how it is built. She stated one of the reasons they wanted the building to be like a canvas was so students visiting can see the application of engineering or design as an art through lasers and other types of things. Mr. Hamilton stated that while they were traveling throughout the country looking at various buildings and museums, they discovered that some of the most cherished or “best in class” places were the ones which were not trying to make a design statement with the building itself, the ones most loved by their communities were born out of utility and with the design statement being inside the building where the exhibits and other programming took center stage. Mr. Cisar stated that this is why it was important to him that the interior structure was given a lot of thought because he has seen a lot of examples where architecture seems to stop at the door. He stated that he feels the interior architecture, not interior “design”, plays a vital role in the development of this project and the images provided only showed a little bit of that. Ms. Morris pointed out that the Missouri River is very animated, it is one of the fastest moving rivers in the country and having that work collectively with the building and from the interior, she feels, is very dynamic and exciting. Mr. Hamilton stated that he, too, believes the interior is very important because the interior is “the Place”, it is where everything is happening.

Mr. Hayes reiterated his previous concerns that he doesn’t see discovery in this building which is just a
box. He still wants to see the design reflect more curves and other elements of nature brought into the design of the building. He wanted to see the river, bluffs, and hills of Omaha in the design. Mr. Hayes stated that the Urban Design Review Board, in his opinion, was the only place in the community who can decide on what the city will look like and he believes the design team can do better. Mr. Hamilton pointed out that the river is the river and it has its own curvatures, movement and beauty; that the contrasting building design will make the river curvature and movement more obvious. Visitors to the Discovery Center will be able to see how the physical science represented in the building compares to, and contrasts with, the natural sciences represented in the river and other surrounding natural elements. In addition, he stated that they are studying interior features which can show geometric design such as curvature and motion as they relate to STEM elements such as math and engineering. Mr. Hayes stated that as a person trained in biophilic design, he was concerned that this “box” did not address any of the aspects of the natural environment around it. Mr. Hamilton stated that biophilia is an important aspect of design, but argued that you don’t get biophilia from a curved façade, it comes from openness, light, air, and plant material.

Mr. Bruce Carpenter of HDR, advised that they had brought in an experiential architect from the New York office who talked about how vital and popular the urban aspect of the area was and how to activate the space to connect with the students and surrounding environment. Regarding the idea of the façade as a canvas, Mr. Carpenter stated that it was important to them that it could be used as a backdrop for events along the riverfront such as festivals and that there was the possibility of projecting art, pictures, or lights on the façade to enhance those experiences. Regarding Mr. Shafer’s concerns about what people coming from Riverside Drive and the parking lot would see, Mr. Carpenter stated that they anticipated most people would be approaching from the south. He pointed out the view into the building facing in that direction which will draw the people in. Mr. Carpenter also pointed out the location of the bus drop off and the overhanging canopy which would be a collector spot for people. In addition, on that same side, is the café which is accessible through that corridor. He stated that they had looked at several structures throughout the country to come up with the design, including one on the bay in Tampa which had a lot of similarities to this Discovery Center and had worked through the information they compiled from those visits to come up with a design and program that they felt worked well for the location, would be an asset to the community, and would connect with their target audience of 12 year olds interested in STEM fields. They had also worked closely with the educators and community leaders to gain their input and opinions which they considered vital to the success of the Discovery Center.

Mr. Peters stated that he needed clarification regarding the waivers being requested for perimeter parking landscaping related to OMC 55-928 as no details were provided in the recommendation report. Mr. Jed Moulton, Urban Design Planning Manager, explained that the Municipal and Urban Design Codes in Omaha require that any waivers would require approval by the Board. He stated that the loading dock is missing landscaping due to the necessity of a wider approach to allow for trucks to enter and exit.

Mr. Peters asked whether there was a lease on both the building site and the parking lot. Ms. Morris explained that the parking lot would remain under MECA management and would remain a City parking lot. He asked for clarification regarding responsibility for the landscaping at the parking area which Mr. Hamilton advised would be part of the Riverfront Revitalization project. The building site is under a lease with the City. Ms. Morris pointed out on the diagram where staff parking would be and acknowledged that they could see the issues with large trucks entering and exiting as well as parking onsite; however, she stated that they did not believe that would occur frequently and that staff could move their cars if necessary. She stated that the majority of trucks would be for catering and things of that nature involving smaller trucks.
Mr. Cisar moved for approval of the preliminary design plans for the Omaha Discovery Center, and approval of a waiver of perimeter parking lot landscaping per OMC 55-928 as requested by the Planning Department; contingent upon an additional review between this meeting and 95% review completion of the project, as deemed appropriate by the Planning staff, to review proposed interior architecture as relevant to the exterior architecture. Mr. Hayes seconded the motion which carried 4-0.

AYES: Peters, Cisar, Schafer, Hayes

Private Projects:
None

Mr. Hayes moved to adjourn the meeting; Mr. Cisar seconded the motion. It was the consensus of the Board to adjourn the meeting at 4:24 p.m.