

COUNCIL ACTION FORM

SUBJECT: DOWNTOWN PLAZA CONCEPT UPDATE

BACKGROUND:

The City Council discussed features and amenities for a new Downtown Plaza at its November 24th meeting. Subsequently, on December 8th, the City Council directed staff to proceed with preparing a conceptual design for a plaza at the site located across from City Hall known as Parking Lot N (Attachment A) as part of the Iowa Reinvestment District Program (IRDP) application process. The plaza would not be directly funded by the IRDP but would serve as a local match for the City's IRDP project. On February 9th City Council will receive a complete Reinvestment District application update before staff finalizes the application, including the plaza concept. The deadline to submit a preliminary application for this program is February 22nd.

The City hired Confluence Landscape Architecture and Planning to help create a concept for the Lot N site that addresses the goals for the project as a new amenity and attraction to Downtown. The scope of work outlined the City Council's ideas for features to include in the concept. Confluence has worked with the City team to address these City Council interests and refine a concept for public comment before finalizing the project for the Reinvestment District application.

CITY COUNCIL GOALS FOR THE PLAZA:

City Council established a task as part of its 2020 goal-setting for creating a new community space Downtown in 2021. City Council discussed goals and features for a plaza as part of its November 24th meeting. The following ideas were given to Confluence to inform the conceptual design of the plaza.

1. Year round use of space (dancing water, flowing water, and ice skating)
2. Ability to host smaller events, such as musical performances
(not to compete with Bandshell productions)
3. Public Restrooms
4. Uses for those of all ages
5. Parking around the Plaza
6. Shelter/Shade Structure
7. Kinetic features
8. Hang out space/seating areas
9. Artwork as interactive pieces of furniture
10. Not all concrete, green space with trees and plantings
11. Innovative design, rather than traditional

PLAZA CONCEPTUAL DESIGN:

The context of the site is critical to determining the design treatment to best achieve the overall goals for the project. Staff and Confluence approached the site through the lens that the plaza is the first investment in public space for Downtown that can expand and include other changes over time as redevelopment occurs in the vicinity. Attachment B depicts this long-term vision for the relationship of the plaza to Downtown. The fundamental approach to the layout of the Plaza is to treat 5th Street as the primary entrance and connection to Downtown with the affiliation to City Hall as a secondary point of emphasis.

Confluence has prepared a conceptual design for the site that incorporates a substantial number of ideas initially identified for the site (Attachment C). The focal points for the project include running water features in the north that flow through plaza as a “runnel” connecting to spray water features at the south. This large space at the south end of the site would also be the location of a skating facility. The skating facility is a ribbon design to emphasize the social and recreational aspect of the use and to make it unique from other skating facilities. If the ribbon design is not viable, the same space can be used for a more traditional open ice-skating area. Staff and Confluence are also exploring using synthetic ice for the facility.

The design also incorporates bike parking along the south edge, opportunities for food trucks or pop-up retail along 5th Street, swinging seats, a support building with restrooms, a signature public art piece, a small built-in platform for performances, and various seating areas with a substantial amount of green space. The plaza concept plan along with summer and winter renderings are included as Attachment C. A presentation about the plaza concept can be found at www.cityofames.org/downtownplaza.

OUTREACH:

The primary outreach tool was community input was the meeting held via Zoom on January 21st. Staff promoted this meeting with advertisements in the Sun, social media, flyers, signage, and radio interviews. **The recording of the presentation and meeting are still available online at www.cityofames.org/downtownplaza. A quick poll and additional comment opportunities are available on the website.** Multiple social media posts on Facebook and Instagram generated additional comments about the project leading up to the meeting on January 21st.

Social media has generated a substantial number of views building general awareness of the project. Eight posts have occurred to date on Facebook resulting in 9,000 to 15,000 views of the posts. Each post generated a number of quick reactions about the feature of the post, such as a water feature, location, art, etc. Each post also generated written comments. Instagram had fewer followers than Facebook with posts ranging from 700 to 1,100 views, with very few comments. All of these posts are still up for anyone that is interested in viewing the reactions.

Staff would characterize this initial input that occurred before the public meeting as having a substantial number of positive reactions and likes. Written comments commonly address more specific issues or concerns that include negative responses about the project. The majority of comments can be categorized as relating to the following issues:

- Loss of parking spaces
- Question about need for the use and its location away from Main St.
- Cost of the facility
- Other priorities for funding
- It would be a Downtown Amenity
- Positive connection to Downtown
- Water features are desirable
- Great for all ages and kids

The January 21st Zoom meeting reached approximately 90 people through a combination of Zoom, YouTube, and Facebook Live, and Ch. 12. During the presentation there were a number of quick polls about specific attributes and features for the plaza, about 50 people participated in the quick polls. At the end of the meeting we responded to a number of questions on a broad range of topics. The interactions during the meeting are included as part of the presentation posted on the Downtown Plaza webpage. General feedback was positive about the design concept and the combination of features. The quick polls results favored the ribbon ice skating facility, flowing water features, support for variety of activities and amenities, bicycle parking, and allowing for food trucks or pop up retail. Questions related to parking, cost, specific design features, public art, wi-fi, maintenance, seating areas, connections to Downtown, types of events, allow for food trucks, and accessible and inclusive design elements.

The feedback to date is very preliminary and staff will provide a more in-depth summary with the February 9th report on the project as the concept was just made available for public review on Thursday night.

PARKING:

As a result of constructing the plaza, all 86 parking stalls in Parking Lot N would be removed.

Existing Lot N - Parking Stalls	
Short Term-Free	12
ADA	3
Reserved	30
Metered 10-hr	41
TOTAL	86

In its place, staff has directed Confluence to show the addition of new angled parking along the west side of Clark Avenue to provide “front door” customer parking for City Hall. This change would total approximately 18 spaces. This change to add parking along the west side of Clark will require the current drive-through drop box to be relocated in front of City Hall. Staff has explored alternatives for relocation and identified retaining the drop box as a walk-up facility only or to locate it in a new median

on Clark with drive-through access. The current concept includes the drive-up median option on the north half of Clark Avenue.

Angled parking with meters will be retained along the 5th Street frontage with one adjustment to the current configuration to test back-in angled parking. Back-in angled parking is new to Ames, but present in other urban environments, such as Des Moines. The pilot project of back-in parking fits with the interface of the Plaza and provides safety benefits to users, especially bicyclists.

Staff will be recommending to the City Council during the February budget hearings another opportunity for adding additional parking to benefit Downtown, regardless of Plaza project. The City owns three lots located at 519, 525, and 601 6th Street, north of City Hall. As part of the Annual Action Plan, these properties, which were purchased with CDBG funds, are planned to be sold at market value. The revenue from the sale is intended to be used to finance a portion of the development costs for affordable housing at 321 State Avenue. In lieu of selling these properties to a third party, it will be staff's recommendation that the City purchase these properties at the appraised value of \$198,000 to reimburse the CDBG program and convert the property to a public parking lot.

These 6th Street properties are strategically located across from City Hall and provide a great opportunity for the City to have flexibility to meet future parking needs for City Hall and Downtown in general. The cost to develop the 6th Street site with a standard surface parking lot with 67 spaces is estimated at approximately \$330,000 (Attachment D). **If this property is developed as parking in combination with the new parking on Clark Avenue, there would be 85 spaces replaced in Downtown.** These improvements along with Clark Avenue changes are proposed to be programmed as City Hall facility improvements separate from the plaza.

FUNDING:

The Downtown Plaza is current a project within the CIP with a budget of \$2.7 million dollar over two-year period. The current design concept includes a number of features with highly variable costs, such as the public art, ice skating facility, water features, and support building. The working estimate for this concept ranges from \$3 million to \$4 million. Confluence will provide a more precise cost estimate for the project as part of final refinements for February 9th.

ALTERNATIVES:

1. Accept the update on the preparation of the Downtown Plaza concept and proceed with preparation of the final concept design and cost estimates for City Council review on February 9th, and to proceed with planning for parking changes to Clark Avenue, 5th Street, and the site on 6th Street.

2. Provide direction to staff and Confluence on issues to address or desired changes prior to completing the final concept design for City Council approval on February 9th.

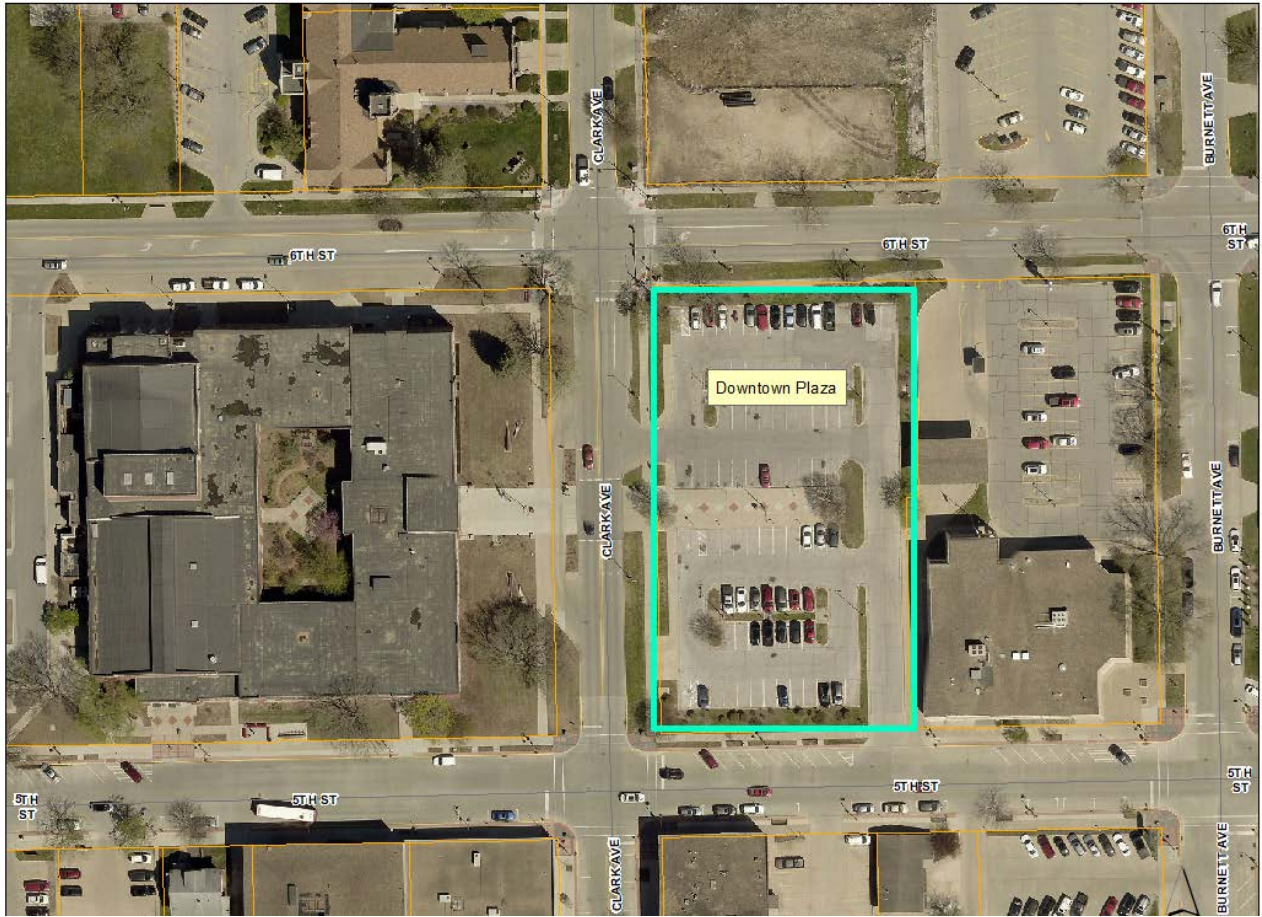
CITY MANAGER’S RECOMMENDED ACTION:

Based upon City Council’s initial direction, staff believes the current concept for plaza incorporates a wide variety of desired features and can become the amenity envisioned for Downtown. Staff supports the context approach of 5th Street as the “front” of the plaza and the approach of creating individual areas for a range of experiences that are cohesively tied together with walkways and water. The larger space for an ice-skating facility allows for the City to choose either the ribbon or a full open ice design during final design work.

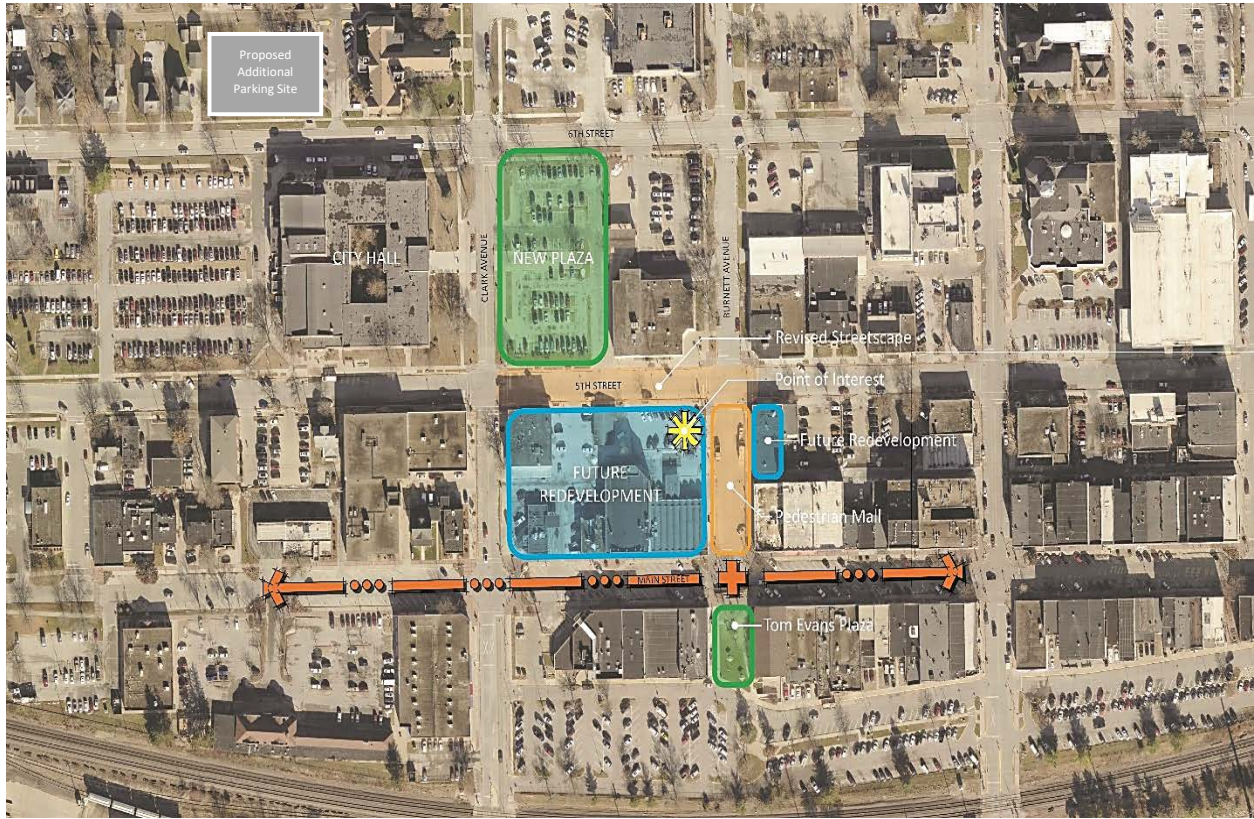
The overall project cost estimate is variable at this time due to the wide range of choices in building size, public art, and ice-skating facilities. Despite the variability in the projected cost of certain features, staff does not believe it affects overall layout of the concept at this time and final decisions on specific features are best addressed at the time the City chooses to move forward with a final design and construction drawings.

Therefore, it is the recommendation of the City Manager that the City Council adopt Alternative #1, as described above. It is important to note that this plaza project is a priority of the City Council regardless if we proceed with the Reinvestment District application.

Attachment A -Location Map



Attachment B-Downtown Context and Future Vision



Attachment C-Plaza Concept



Downtown Ames Plaza Master Plan



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Downtown Ames Plaza Master Plan



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Attachment D-6th Street Properties Parking Lot Design

