

STAFF REPORT

Date: July 27, 2016

To: Mayor and City Council

Thru: Andrew Clinger, City Manager

Subject: J.6. Staff Report (For Possible Action): Presentation, discussion and potential approval of the preferred design concept for the ReTRAC covers and the development of an implementation strategy.

From: Maureen McKissick, Director, Office of Policy and Strategy

City of Reno Strategic Priority Alignment: Thriving Downtown and University District, Vibrant Neighborhoods and Public Places

Summary: Staff has completed the Council's direction from August 12 and December 2, 2015. After extensive community engagement during 2015, a charrette comprised of a variety of urban design professionals was convened on March 21, 2016 at the Nevada Museum of Art to develop concepts for the ReTRAC covers' redevelopment which incorporated the community's inputs. Three design frameworks were proposed. Staff presented the frameworks to representatives of the adjacent property owners on the East Cover (April 22, 2016) and the West Cover (May 4, 2016) to obtain their feedback. Consensus was reached on a set of preferred themes.

Staff now seeks Council approval of 1) the preferred design framework for the ReTRAC covers and 2) the development of an implementation strategy that will bring them to fruition.

Previous Council Action:

December 2, 2015 – Council approved the process to develop and refine plans for the preferred redevelopment options for the ReTRAC covers.

August 12, 2015 – Council directed staff to undertake a limited community engagement process to identify preferred redevelopment options for the ReTRAC covers.

November 28, 2007 – Council and the Redevelopment Board agreed to the concept of a phased construction of the proposed ReTRAC Enhancements Reno Center Plaza and identified potential funding sources for design and construction of Phase I.

January 11, 2007 – Council agreed to permit L3 Development’s design team to evaluate alternative design concepts for a proposed trench cover creating a pedestrian plaza over the top of the ReTRAC trench.

September 27, 2006 – Council provided direction on the location, extent and architectural look of the proposed pedestrian plaza to cover the ReTRAC trench between Virginia and West Streets. Council approved Change Order Number 86, in the amount of \$6,521,319, to the Design Build Contract No. PWP-WA-2002-292 with Granite Construction Company for design and construction of the ReTRAC Enhancement Project Phase IIa.

May 24, 2006 – Council approved Change Order Number 82, in the amount of \$3,268,909, to the Design Build Contract No. PWP-WA-2002-292 with Granite Construction Company for design and construction of the ReTRAC Enhancement Project Phase I. In addition, Council approved selection of the ReTRAC Enhancement Option 1 which included Change Order No. 82, a pedestrian crossing over the trench at the historic train depot and the extension of a trench cover from Virginia Street to at least mid-block between Sierra and West Streets. Council also directed staff to continue to seek funding for the extension of the trench cover fully between Sierra and West Streets.

August 24, 2005 – Council provided direction on the location, extent, and architectural look of the trench cover and pedestrian improvements of the ReTRAC Enhancement Project.

Background: The City built the ReTRAC covers in 2006 during the final stages of the ReTRAC project. Their purpose was to provide new capacity for downtown properties and special event organizers to program activities which would improve the economic vitality of the urban core. The City continues to own, operate and maintain them. For approximately half the year, the covers are not in use. During May-October, however, they are used virtually every weekend to stage 30+ special events, e.g. Reno Rodeo, Hot August Nights, and, more recently, the Reno Sculpture Festival.

Since their construction, only one formal development plan has been brought forward. On November 28, 2007, Council approved a design plan by L3 Development – the developers of the Montage – which called for a pedestrian plaza with retail stores and limited landscaping along the periphery. One of the renderings which was presented to Council that day is shown below:



On July 29, 2009, the Redevelopment Agency released a Request-for-Proposal (RFP #030058) for a private developer to implement the proposed plan; the RFP remained open until December 1, 2009, but no proposals were received. The feeling at the time was that the economic downturn had been a significant factor in the RFP’s non-productivity. There have been no subsequent plans developed for the ReTRAC covers.

In the last 18 months, there has been a resurgence of interest in the covers; their central location combined with the existing lack of improvements provides a unique “blue sky” opportunity for place-making in the urban core. Several community groups have been involved in exploring how to maximize the unique potential of this urban space; the Vanguard Conference in May 2015, for example, suggested a short-term “intervention” to activate the area and more recently in the first part of 2016 the City temporarily installed the “BELIEVE” sculpture.

The Nevada Museum of Art (NMA), through its participation in the Vanguard Conference, and its work with Black Rock Design Institute and the Center for Art + Environment, has a professional interest in being part of the momentum to re-envision the covers as a vibrant component of the emerging downtown environment. NMA offered to contribute its expertise and staff resources to assist in identifying potential options for this space. City staff has been collaborating with NMA staff since January 2015.

With Council’s direction, staff convened a series of community engagements in the second half of 2015 to gather input on preferred options for the cover’s redevelopment:

1. A special meeting of the Reno Redevelopment Agency Advisory Board on September 16, 2015 (22 attendants)
2. The DICE Symposium on September 24, 2015 (80 attendants)
3. A special meeting of the Regional Alliance for Downtown (RAD) on September 28, 2015 (40 attendants)

Staff then met with representatives from the adjacent properties, i.e. Eldorado, Montage and Whitney Peak, presented the inputs that were obtained from the three meetings, and came to

consensus on the preferred options. A summary of the options was presented to City Council for approval on December 12, 2015.

The consensus included:

- Soften the ReTRAC covers' environment by planting street trees along the north and south sides of the covers and installing grass, shrubs and planters (where possible) to define areas and/or walkways
- Install little white ("twinkle") lights on the trees
- Assess lighting overall and potentially add more lights for nighttime activities. Residents of the Montage requested that care be given to designing nighttime lighting that did not impact their residences.
- Create permanent infrastructure for shade, e.g. canvas "sails," over the center of the covers
- Include art elements, especially sculptures
- Consider integrating historic elements, e.g. markers, signage
- Consider creating a dog park on the west cover (request from Montage residents)
- Explore the use of distinctive pavement treatments that enliven the center of the covers, especially the use of color
- Explore the use of parklets to create temporary seating and greenery
- Create opportunities for retail along the perimeter of the covers, e.g. al fresco dining, kiosks, dedicated food truck locations
- Ensure pedestrian safety between the east and west covers, across Sierra Street
- Explore the feasibility of abandoning Commercial Row between Arlington Avenue and Sierra Street to enhance pedestrian access and increase retail space

Discussion: On March 21, 2016, the NMA hosted an all-day charrette, an intensive planning and design session. The charrette was comprised of 14 urban design professionals, seven from our region and seven from other cities in the west. The charrette kicked off with presentations covering historical information and engineering background which were provided by staff; Alicia Barber, Chair of the Reno Historic Resources Commission; and Joe Shields, P.E., Ferrari Shields Engineering. Participants then broke into project teams, and, using the preferred options identified by the community and the adjacent property owners as a springboard, worked for the remainder of the day on developing frameworks for creative place-making. The majority of the preferred options from the community were incorporated into the teams' work.

The charrette was privately funded through generous donations and in-kind support from the Stacie Mathewson Foundation, the Eldorado, Whitney Peak, EDawn, Black Rock Design Institute, and various private citizens. The NMA donated the use of the new Skyroom facility, which was an inspirational venue for "blue sky" brainstorming. Eldorado and Whitney Peak provided *pro bono* welcome packs, professional design and printing of charrette materials, lodging, meals, and a videographer.

At the end of the day, the teams presented their work to one another and to various leaders in the community, e.g. City Council members, City executive staff, donors, and members of the Regional Alliance for Downtown and the Redevelopment Agency Advisory Board. Three distinct conceptual frameworks were formulated:

- The most transformative framework entailed the creation of a new, high-rise, cutting-edge “smart” City Hall straddling the train trench just east of Virginia Street. The new building would face west, toward the covers, introducing a civic component as one of the plaza’s uses. This framework would likely entail the highest cost, although many of the charrette participants and guests were intrigued by its potential.
- The other two frameworks entailed the creation of new commercial spaces on the east cover and new neighborhood-focused spaces on the west cover. Different landscape architecture designs and “hardscape” features would be used to define temporary and permanent uses, e.g. seating, parklets, container stores, and shade structures. One of the frameworks called for a new amphitheater on the east cover, while the other called for a new Highline-inspired “trail” featuring a raised walking surface with plantings and seating.

All three frameworks included some common themes:

1. Program alignment: east cover to have a more commercial/retail/formal programmatic focus; west cover to have a more residential/park/informal programmatic focus
2. Larger architectural structures on the east cover, closest to Virginia Street
3. Circulation pattern from east to west
4. The inclusion of art and local context, e.g. history, to make the space Reno-specific
5. Street level raised to pedestrian level of the covers, reducing the potential for pedestrian/traffic conflicts by alerting motorists that they are entering a pedestrian area
6. Use of trees, landscaping and design features to create screens and discrete spaces, and to define programmatic uses

Staff met with representatives of the adjacent property owners along the East Cover (Eldorado and Whitney Peak: April 22, 2016) and West Cover (Montage, both residential and commercial, and 3rd Street Lofts: May 4, 2016) and presented the results of the charrette for their consideration, discussion and consensus. After a roundtable discussion, both groups supported the themes listed above and expressed their wholehearted support to move forward.

What are the next steps?

Staff is pursuing several funding opportunities as part of a multi-pronged strategy to implement the project. There are several national grant makers, most notably ArtPlace, which provide significant support for community-based place-making projects which incorporate art. Part of the

grant proposal will include the completion of a final design. ArtPlace has an annual funding cycle, with the first stage of the process occurring in November.

In preparation to pursue this and other grant opportunities, on May 26, 2016, staff requested an allocation of \$250,000 from the Capital Projects Surcharge Advisory Subcommittee for FY 16/17; if approved, this allocation will be used as a match to leverage other funding. Staff has also been in communication with several community leaders who have expressed interest in donating to the project. Lastly, building on “lessons learned” from the successful Highline Project, staff is also considering the creation of a “Friends of the ReTRAC Plaza” 501(c)3 non-profit to serve as an independent funding receptacle during the implementation phase.

Financial Implications: There are no financial implications known at this time.

Legal Implications: There are no legal implications known at this time.

Recommendation: Staff recommends Council approval of the preferred design concept for the ReTRAC covers and the development of an implementation strategy

Proposed Motion: I move to approve staff recommendation.