



DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

Planning Division

m e m o r a n d u m

TO: The Urbana Plan Commission

FROM: Elizabeth H. Tyler, AICP, Community Development Director

DATE: November 14, 2008

SUBJECT: Cunningham Avenue Beautification Final Report

Introduction & Background

The purpose of this report is to give the Plan Commission a chance to review the substantially completed version of the Cunningham Avenue Beautification Final Report. On December 1st, the Final Report will go to City Council for acceptance before the City proceeds into a detailed engineering and design phase that will commence once funds have been budgeted for the project. The Plan Commission is welcome to identify and discuss and planning concerns for implementation.

The Cunningham Avenue Beautification Study (the “Study”) was done primarily as an implementation measure of the TIF 4 Plan, which was also picked up on the Comprehensive Plan and Council goals. The Urbana City Council requested, as part of their Common Goals, that improvement and beautification of Urbana’s entryway corridors be made a primary goal in order to improve the appearance, image, and suitability for investment along those corridors. Because of several factors, the Cunningham Avenue entryway corridor was chosen as the area of focus for a Beautification Study. Those factors included the fact that it is the major entryway into the heart of Urbana (especially the downtown area), the need for improvement of the image of the corridor, and the availability of the TIF funding mechanism to fund a study and many of the recommended improvements.

The specific goal of the Study is “to identify ways to improve the corridor as an urban environment, increasing redevelopment potential, multi-modal use, and connection the downtown.” Beautification of Cunningham Avenue is specifically identified as part of the Redevelopment Plan laid out in the “Cunningham Avenue Tax Increment Financing Redevelopment Plan” (TIF 4 Plan) approved by City Council on December 17, 2001. It is also identified as part of the “Urbana City Council Multi-Year Goals and Staff Work Plan 2006”. The Downtown Strategic Plan and 2005 Urbana Comprehensive Plan were also reviewed and considered by the consultants during the design phase of the project. Corridor beautification is supported in each of these planning and policy documents.

The 2005 Urbana Comprehensive Plan specifically outlines goals and objectives for supporting beautification of Urbana's commercial corridors on page 43 where it states:

Goal 26.0 Improve the appearance of Urbana's commercial and industrial areas

Objectives

- 26.1 Use a variety of economic development tools (such as tax increment financing) to improve the appearance and functionality of Urbana's commercial and industrial areas
- 26.2 Promote the beautification of commercial areas along University Avenue, Cunningham Avenue, and Philo Road

Page 75 of the Urbana Comprehensive Plan shows Map #4 of the Future Land Use Maps. This map depicts the area including most of the Cunningham Avenue Corridor and one of the notes on the map states, "Beautify Cunningham Corridor. Gateway to Downtown Urbana."

The City initiated the first phase of the Study by sending out Requests for Proposals to multiple planning and landscape architecture firms. The City reviewed a number of proposals and selected Claire Bennett Associates ("CBA") as the firm best qualified to do the study based on several criteria including: quality of their proposal, emphasis on public art, and ability to do a market study of the area.

A kickoff meeting and initial data acquisition was commenced in November 2007. City staff assisted CBA with providing certain data, setting up public and stakeholder meetings, and holding regular Project Committee meetings to discuss the project progress and steps. The Project Committee consisted of Mayor Prussing; Councilman Roberts; and City staff members Libby Tyler, Tom Carrino, Ryan Brault, Robert Myers, Lisa Karcher, Bill Gray, Gale Jamison, and Anna Hochhalter.

Several stakeholder and public input meetings were held, along with a brainstorming charrette and presentations of the concepts. The following is a timeline for the Study:

- November 8, 2007 – Pre-contract/kickoff meeting
- November 2007 – January 2008 – Data acquisition and market analysis
- January 31, 2008 – Stakeholder input sessions
- March 4, 2008 – Public input forum
- March 5-6, 2008 – Planning and design charrette and public presentation
- April 24, 2008 – Presentation of Design Concepts to Committee
- May 12, 2008 – Presentation of Design Concepts to Business Group
- June 5, 2008 – IDOT coordination meeting
- August 2008 – First Final Report draft
- September-October 2008 – Report revisions
- October 20, 2008 – Public meeting and presentation of Final Report to Council
- November 2008 – Final revisions
- November 6, 2008 – Received official IDOT comments (attached)
- November 20, 2008 – Plan Commission for comment
- December 1, 2008 (scheduled) – City Council for acceptance

The Study process is outlined in further detail on pages 4-8 of the Final Report.

The general recommendations and design elements of the plan are as follows:

- Use integral-colored, scored concrete as major intersections along the corridor
- Use ornamental trees at each enhanced intersection
- Plant new and maintain existing street trees along the corridor
- Use raised, decorative planters at key intersections and at the I-74 interchange
- Construct 6 foot wide sidewalks on both sides of Cunningham Avenue south of Kenyon Road
- Construct a ten foot wide multi-use trail on Cunningham Avenue from Kenyon Road to Airport Road
- Use integral public art at key locations, including the I-74 interchange, Perkins/Country Club Road intersection, and the railroad overpass on Vine Street south of Five Points
- Decorative seat walls in strategic areas to screen parking and define edges
- Native prairie plantings in the I-74 interchange infields
- Future mini-park/trailhead at Saline Branch on east side of Cunningham Avenue
- Optional layouts for the Visitor's Center near Country Club/Perkins Road
- Construct an optional roundabout at the intersection of Country Club/Perkins Road (IDOT later commented they would not allow this)

Further detail and concept drawings of the proposed improvements are found in the Final Report. It is important to mention that this a planning level study. We have not yet entered the “design phase”.

Planning Implications

One final item to note regarding the Study is that the entire design concept fits within the existing Cunningham Avenue right-of-way. Not only does this make the project easier to implement because it does not require acquiring easements or other property, but it means that there will be no direct physical impact to properties along the corridor. The only other potential impacts to properties along the corridor might be the elimination of some driveways. Those will be pursued in coordination with IDOT and the property owners themselves. No changes to zoning are required or recommended as part of this Study.

Financial Impact

A “preliminary cost opinion” is found on pages 38 and 39 of the Study and breaks the project down into four sections. The total estimated cost (excluding the optional roundabout that was ruled out by IDOT) is between approximately \$6.5 million and just over \$8 million in today's dollars. It is anticipated that a majority of the engineering design and implementation costs would come from TIF 4 funds. Because Cunningham Avenue is a US Route, there is some opportunity to acquire grant funds for portions of the project.

It should be noted that because the Cunningham Avenue corridor is within a Tax Increment Finance district, the ability to fund the project is dependent upon growth of increment within the boundaries of the TIF. Any substantial investment that occurs in the TIF will greatly enhance the City's ability to implement the project in a timely manner. It is likely that the project will need to be phased over time, either by focusing on a particular area of the corridor or by focusing on certain design elements. This will likely be dictated by when and where future investment occurs along the corridor.

Recommendations

It is requested that the Plan Commission review the Cunningham Avenue Beautification Final Report and identify any planning concerns about project implementation.

Prepared by:

Ryan Brault, Redevelopment Specialist

Attachments:
IDOT Comments

Separate:
CBA Inc., Cunningham Avenue Beautification Final Report, October 20, 2008 (Hard copies are being distributed to Plan Commission members. All others will receive CD's of the Plan. Hard copies can be made available upon request by calling 384-2440.)

cc:
CBA Studios, 277 E. 12th Street, Indianapolis, IN 46202



Illinois Department of Transportation

Division of Highways / Region 3 / District 5
13473 IL Highway 133 / P.O. Box 610 / Paris, Illinois / 61944
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November 6, 2008

RE: Cunningham Avenue Beautification
Champaign County (City of Urbana)

Mr. William Gray
Public Works Director, City of Urbana
706 South Glover Ave.
Urbana, Illinois 61801

Dear Mr. Gray:

As requested the district has reviewed the Cunningham Avenue Beautification report dated August 2008. We offer the following comments for your consideration.

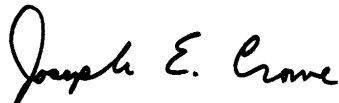
- The safety of the traveling public must be carefully evaluated with any proposed roadway improvement. The focus of the study clearly revolved around the aesthetic enhancements that could be made to the corridor rather than the safety impacts these enhancements may have. In order for the district to approve any of the proposed improvements the city will need to show the public's safety is not compromised.
- Access management was discussed in the report and can be an effective safety improvement. The district can pursue the elimination of abandoned entrances, but will likely need local support to effect the closures.
- The district would be happy to work with the city to determine appropriate plantings for the right of way. Adequate sight distances must be provided at all side streets and entrances. Dense ornamentation may not prevent an errant vehicle from the full use of the clear zone, but may eliminate an escape route for vulnerable users such as pedestrians and bicyclists.
- The district does not view Cunningham Avenue as a suitable route for a roundabout. There are no modern roundabouts either built nor in the planning stages in the seven east central Illinois counties that comprise District 5. A two lane roundabout on a roadway with an average daily traffic of over 22,000 vehicles should not be the public's first experience with a modern roundabout. The pedestrian mobility goals outlined in the report would not be served by a roundabout. Visually impaired pedestrians typically struggle to find audible clues to determine safe gaps for crossing streets approaching a roundabout.

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- Any decorative pavement should be limited to the area between the stop bars at intersections. The layout of the coloration will have to be carefully designed to avoid leading unfamiliar motorists executing turning movements into the incorrect lane. For example the pattern shown in Exhibit 4B could lead westbound to southbound traffic into the opposing lane. Pavement colors will also need to provide a contrast between pavement and pavement markings.
- While the district is not opposed to placing public art on the right of way, we cannot support the placement of large sculptures that will distract high speed travelers on I-74. Given the scale of the artwork at the I-74 interchange it appears that the designer's intent was to draw the attention of passing vehicles. Every effort should be made to avoid distracting interstate traffic. We recognize this is counterintuitive to many community's desires to provide a landmark or visible cue that their community is special. In an attempt to compromise the department has worked with many communities around the state to enhance interchanges. Work on the Dan Ryan in Chicago or I-74 in Peoria are good examples of locations where artistic design features have been successfully integrated into the context of a roadway.
- The city will be responsible for maintaining any beautification features placed on the right of way. This includes the pavement if colored or decorative pavement is used. The district and city will have to work closely together on any permits or utility work to ensure the beautification features remain intact.
- The city should consider proceeding with a formal Phase I report. The report will be necessary should any federal funds administered by FHWA be used on the project. Even if federal funds are not used the report will provide environmental clearances in accordance with the National Environmental Protection Act and design approval from the department for the proposed improvements. Completion of Phase I will also assure reviewers of grant applications that the city is committed to the project and ready to proceed when funding is made available.

If you have any questions regarding the above comments, or if we can provide any additional assistance, please contact Mr. David Speicher, District 5 Local Roads Engineer, at 217-466-7252 or david.speicher@illinois.gov.

Very truly yours,



Joseph E. Crowe, P.E.
Deputy Director of Highways,
Region Three Engineer