

**BALTIMORE CITY DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING
URBAN DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE REVIEW PANEL
MEETING MINUTES**

Date: December 10, 2009

Meeting No: 105

Project: Improvements for Pedestrian Safety/Biopark Imagery

Phase: Discussion

Location: Proposed MLK, Jr and West Baltimore Street

PRESENTATION:

The meeting began with the introduction of the Planning Department's nine point urban design goals for the project. Jane Shaab, Senior Vice President of UMB's Research Park Corporation provided the project's background and pointed out the recent successes and enormous potential of the Biopark to the city and to the region. She further focused the discussion on pedestrian safety at this critical entry to the park and described a generous gift of Cherry trees to the University for the use at the Biopark or elsewhere in the city. She also indicated that a revised master plan for the Biopark would be shared with the Panel in the near future.

Charles Wilson of ASG Architects described the relationship of the project to the greater MLK environment and pointed out the key aspects of their proposal and the importance of seeking new expressions of connectivity across MLK such as the one at West Baltimore Street. He pointed out that Pratt Street and Saratoga Street raises similar challenges although Baltimore Street marks the connection to the Biopark and the heart of its medical campus.

Scott Huot of Floura Teeter Landscape Architects Inc. gave the background of the proposed landscape concepts for the project. The major objectives of the design team were described as follows:

1. Improve pedestrian safety;
2. Create an iconic gateway/wayfinding;
3. Reinforce strong connections;
4. Enhance circulation for improved visibility for pedestrians, bicyclists, vehicles & transit buses;
5. Increase visibility of the BioPark;
6. Change the setting to reinforce a gateway aesthetic.

The major elements of the proposed plan included eliminating critical turns at this intersection and opening up access to MLK at Fremont Street; extended sidewalk/crosswalk areas; new curbs, paving material and hardscape to improve the safety and security of the area; redesigning the bus dropoffs; new Cherry Trees for the entire area including the traffic island of MLK; new major signing/sculpture opportunities and the elimination of a stand of mature oak trees that currently provide shade and scale to this section of MLK Boulevard.

COMMENTS OF THE PANEL:

The Panel discussed the elements of the proposed plan and reflected on the perceptions of the future role of important pedestrian crossings of MLK Boulevard like the one at Baltimore Street. The Panel agreed on the need to rethink aspects of the existing boulevard in the context of these critical re-emerging connections. It was agreed also that it is entirely appropriate to make changes regarding new street connections, eliminating auto and pedestrian conflicts, reestablishing new curbs and bus lanes and drop offs in order to address this currently stressed condition. However, beyond that agreement, there are several major concerns regarding other aspects of the current proposal:

- A. ***Landscape – Existing Oak Trees*** – Panelists expressed concern that the current landscape-based proposal represents “overkill”. The “overkill” aspect of the criticism reflects the unanimous concern regarding the elimination of the mature Oak trees in the major existing planting areas. While surface and hardscape improvements are certainly needed to the area (in terms of safety and visibility), the removal of most (if not all) of these mature trees should be avoided for as much as possible. The Panel feels strongly that these trees help establish edge, order, softness, shade and an appropriate scalar device for the urban design of both MLK and the surrounding BioPark buildings and would like to see them incorporated into any future design.
- B. ***Cherry Trees*** – Although, the gifted Cherry Trees represent an unusual and great opportunity, there was considerable concern that their size and form are inappropriate in civic scale and impact to replace the existing large Oak trees. The Cherry trees in the MLK median were thought to have good potential in demarking a change in the look of the Boulevard although the curving layout was deemed to be ineffectual.
- C. ***Baltimore Street Transit Shelters/Identity*** – The Panel agreed that the transit busses arriving and disembarking from this location are important to its identity and purpose. However, the elimination of trees or vertical landscape elements in this location was felt to detract from the potential of Baltimore Street’s sense of continuity as it passes across this critical place. Continuous weather protection, lighting, and monumentality might be employed in addition to seating and planting to reinforce the importance of this crossing promenade and Baltimore Street itself.
- D. ***Grander Civic Gestures*** – It was suggested that the project would benefit from bigger gestures that reflect the civic importance of this crossing. Gestures that may be seen by automobiles in advance of the actually crossing to visually forewarn them of slower traffic and announce an important pedestrian zone. These gestures might include environmental graphics, celebratory lighting elements, fountains, sculpture, flags, and/or changes in street material or textures but should broaden the palette of applications available.
- E. ***Full Visibility to Research Park Building*** – The Panel felt that the real scale and visibility of the actual buildings of the BioPark are not hampered by the existing

trees and that the current condition reflects an almost ideal shaded urban landscape which should be valued.

- F. ***Identity/Signing*** – There was some concern voiced that this intersection should not be marked singularly as an entrance to the BioPark but more universally as the entrance to the larger community.

PANEL ACTION:

Since this presentation was provided for discussion purposes only, no approval was requested or given although the Panel has strongly recommended reconsideration and restudy of the proposed design.

Attending:

Jane Shaab – UMB Biopark
Charles Wilson – ASG Architects
Scott Huot, Shannon Early – Floura Teeter Landscape Architects Inc.
Kate McManus – UMB President’s Office
Ron Brown, Arthur Rose, Linda Cassard – UMB
Susan Williams, Brian Biddle – STV
Ron Kreitner – Westside Renaissance
LaToya Staten – DPOB
Ed Gunts – Sun
Paul Dombrowski – BDC

Ms. Eig, Messrs. Bowden, Britt, Cameron, Ramberg – UDARP
Tom Stosur, Gary Cole, Brent Flickinger, Gary Letteron, Wolde Ararsa,
Bob Quilter - Planning