

REPORT

Office of the Chief Administrative Officer and Parks & Recreation

To: Mayor Johnstone and Members of Council
Date: December 12, 2022

From: Lisa Spitale,
Chief Administrative Officer
File: 2186839

Dean Gibson,
Director of Parks and Recreation
Item #: 2022-759

Subject: Downtown Livability – Public Realm Improvements and Activation

RECOMMENDATION

THAT Council approve the next steps as outlined in the staff report.

PURPOSE

To update Council on the Downtown public realm improvements and activation initiatives that are completed, planned or underway to support the goals and objectives of the Downtown Livability Strategy.

SUMMARY

This report provides Council with an update on completed and upcoming public realm improvements and activation initiatives in the Downtown that support the Downtown Livability Strategy. While this report will focus on plans for implementation of the permanent stairs and flex space (developed in 2017/ 2018) at the east end of the Front Street Mews (at Fourth Street), it will also highlight a complement of ongoing initiatives, activations and options currently under review for graffiti abatement and public art opportunities.

BACKGROUND

As part of the ongoing challenges with Downtown Livability, staff continue to develop a range of public realm improvements and activation. These improvements are intended to be implemented in the short- and long-term to:

- Work with partners to test the feasibility and effectiveness of new public spaces/ activations;
- Activate and reimagine existing underutilized spaces;
- Foster a shift to animate public spaces and build community;
- Support on-going community and civic produced activations; and
- Pilot new programs/ initiatives to enable better public life in the Downtown.

One of the big transformational moves within the Downtown was the removal of a portion of the Front Street Parkade (west of 6th Street) in 2015, and this section of Front Street being redesigned as a “Mews”. Constructed in 2017, the contemporary design for the mews transformed car-oriented infrastructure into a place for people with: a continuous plaza-like paving pattern, social seating areas, lighting, street trees, traffic calming, public art, and 35 back-in angled parking stalls to support access to local businesses. The universally accessible, one-way street is designed for day-to-day social and retail activity as well as for temporary closures to host special events and community festivals. Between 2015 and 2017, the City invested \$11,616,000 into the Front St. area (including west parkade demolition and east parkade rehabilitation) to complete the above works.

The preferred design option for the western portion of the mews (between Sixth Street and Begbie Street) was informed by feedback collected through a comprehensive community engagement process including stakeholder workshops with the Downtown business owners. Through the consultation process, the stakeholders also expressed the importance of continuity from west to east along the entire Mews, from Begbie Street to Fourth Street. For example, it was suggested that the colours, materials and textures implemented west of Sixth Street could be keyed into the eastern portion of the Mews with continuation of lighting standards, colourful banners or paving textures.

As a result of the consultation process, staff developed a comprehensive plan for the entire Mews and implemented public realm improvements (temporary and permanent) accordingly. This comprehensive plan (refer to Figure 1 below) was presented and supported by the Mayor’s Task Force on the Riverfront and Public Realm on January 9, 2017.

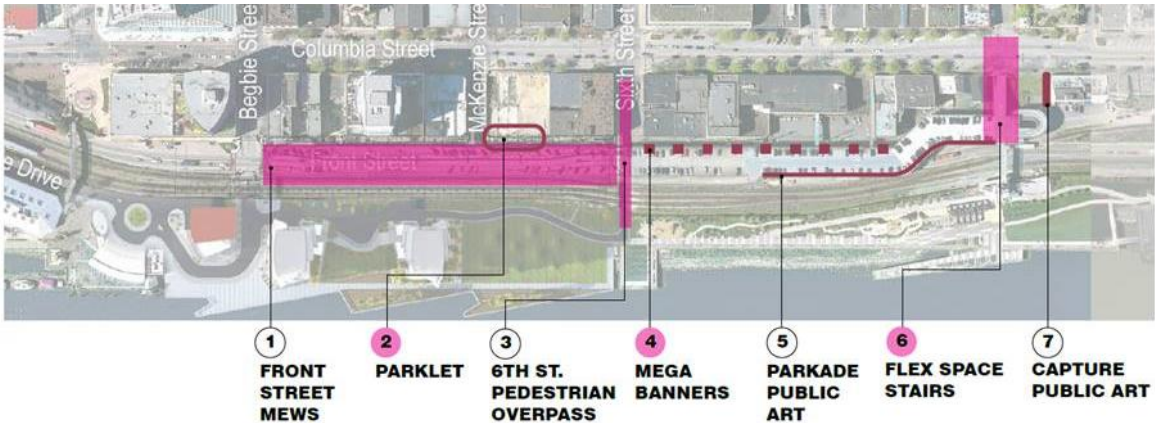


Figure 1. Overview- Front Street Mews Public Realm Improvements (2017)

The majority of the improvements along the eastern portion of the mews were temporary in nature while a larger, more permanent plan was under development. The installation of the improvements (i.e. temporary stairs, catenary lighting, mega banners, large-scale mural and street paint) was timely as part of the City’s efforts to support the ‘Friday’s on Front Holiday Edition’ market. This seasonal event was hosted under the parkade by the Downtown Business Improvement Association (DBIA) in December 2018 (refer to Figure 2 below) and was successful in showcasing how this unique covered space may be utilized for programming and community events.



Figure 2. Image- Fridays on Front Holiday Edition (2018)

While the temporary improvements were underway, staff continued to workshop with the Front Street business owners and the DBIA on ideas for developing the permanent Fourth Street stairs and flex space (refer to Figure 3 for location). This workshop took place on October 24, 2017 and included a presentation and small table discussions. Staff also presented the design concept to the Public Art Advisory Committee (PAAC) on September 11, 2017 to discuss opportunities for integrating public art.

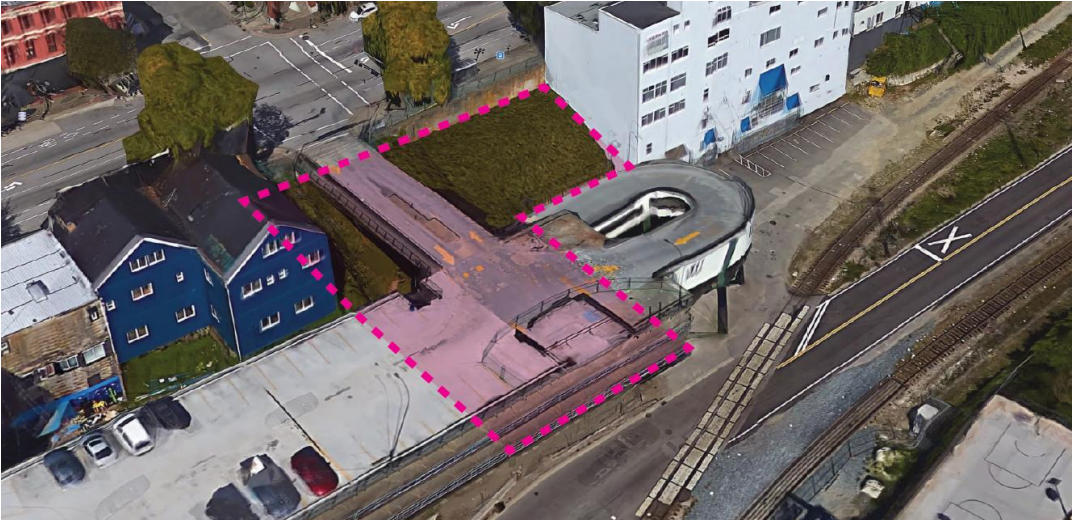


Figure 3. Overview- Location of Permanent Fourth Street Stairs and Flex Space

Following the workshop, the design concept was further developed and finalized by a consultant team including architectural, landscape architectural, engineering (civil, structural and geotechnical) and electrical consultants. The consultants also prepared a tender package in late 2018 which included an order of magnitude cost estimate.

While this process was underway, staff were simultaneously engaging the community on the relocation of the Mercer Stadium Skatepark (November 2017). A number of locations for a new skatepark were contemplated, including the covered space below the parkade at Fourth Street. Based on the feedback received, a central, destination skatepark was constructed in Queen's Park. Since the location under the Parkade was also highly favoured, it was recommended that, in addition to the destination skatepark, two to three "street-style" skatespots (i.e. skateable features, such as a single ramp, rail, or skateable art, integrated into existing open spaces providing a weather protected skateboarding experience for local users, and can function as a social gathering space) be integrated under the Front Street Parkade as part of the proposed Fourth Street Stairs and Flex Space project (refer to Attachment 1 of this report for an overview of the conceptual design and precedents).

DISCUSSION

Fourth Street Stairs and Flex Space

The Fourth Street Stairs and Flex Space design concept (refer to attachment 1 of this report) intends to create a unique identity and vitality at the east end of the mews and to provide a public space that may be enjoyed throughout the year, both day and night. The design that was developed with stakeholders includes permanent concrete stairs, treatment of the hillside (i.e. hard surface treatment to mitigate growth of invasive species and minimize risk associated with some of the activity which occurs on and adjacent the temporary stairs and hillside today), feature lighting, drainage improvements and flex space that offers opportunities for a wide range of program/ events, public art and street-style skate features.

Through the 2020-2024 capital planning process this project was originally contemplated for implementation in 2022. Like many of the City's capital projects planned for 2021 and 2022, it was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Provisional funding to construct the Fourth Street Stairs and Flex Space is included in the 2023 Capital Budget proposal.

Downtown Activation

Festivals and cultural activations enhance public life in the Downtown core. City staff work in partnership with community organizations such as the Pride Society, DBIA, Hyack Festival Association, and many others who are able to access the City grant and other forms of funding in order for them to host events such as Pride Festival, Car Free Day, Fridays on Front, End of Summer Fireworks as well as a variety of concerts and markets.

Ongoing efforts by the Special Events Team support year round activations that foster community spirit and provide a sense of identity and belonging to the neighborhood.

Community events such as Family Day, Easter in the City, Canada Day, Truth and Reconciliation Day, Shine Bright and the Rest of New West provide unique opportunities for building strong working relationships with community partners and bringing positive activity to a range of areas throughout the city, including those experiencing challenges.

The City also seeks government and corporate funding to provide additional activations on the street and in parks as opportunities become available. In partnership with the DBIA, a timber platform was integrated into the Hyack plaza in Fall 2022 that serves as a stage for special events and a seating area on a day-to-day basis. Plans for programming events to utilize the stage are underway for the Spring/ Summer months in 2023. Additional events underway in 2023 include Outside/In (a 6 day concert series and street social) and the Play Park (a showcase of local entertainment and food).

The implementation of the Fourth Street Stairs and Flex Space provides additional opportunities to positively activate and animate an otherwise under-utilized area of the Downtown. The success of these efforts will be contingent upon ongoing joint efforts between the City and community/business organizations and local residents. In this regard, additional resources will be required to appropriately sustain the City's facilitation and participation in these many joint undertakings.

Graffiti Abatement

City staff will explore additional strategies to support businesses in managing graffiti and vandalism. This will include reviewing the viability of programs and integrated graffiti management strategies that have been successfully implemented in other municipalities.

Public Art Opportunities

Staff will explore preventive strategies to address nuisance graffiti impacting local businesses Downtown such as murals and street art programs.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The total 2023 financial implications to improve the Downtown Public Realm and Activation are being determined and will be brought forward with the 2023 Operating and Capital Budget proposals. To date, some of the known cost estimates and existing budgets are as follows:

Fourth Street Stairs and Flex Space:

- \$0.002M – Planning & Design 4th Street Feature Stairway – spent 2018 – Insurance proceeds
- \$0.500M – 4th Street Feature Stairway – Approved Capital Budget BU 12151 – Source – general fund reserve**
- \$TBD – 2023 Operating Costs related to programming (supporting and presenting events and activations), maintenance and cleanliness

**Current cost estimate is from 2018 - given inflationary increases in construction costs, it is anticipated that this will not be sufficient to deliver the project, and staff are therefore in the process of updating cost estimates and adjusting the budget request as part of the 2023 Capital Budget process.

Downtown Activation:

- \$0.008M - Permanent full-time Program Coordinator position – funding source TBD – (unsecured)
- \$0.002M - Auxiliary staff support, primarily for event day activities – manage within existing approved Operating Budgets – general fund*

* **Permanent full-time Program Coordinator** - support program coordination functions to support community partner organizations and work with City departments to enable community activations and events focused around diversity, equity, inclusion and anti-racism (DEIAR) priorities - ongoing civic observance and celebrations such as Canada Day, Black History Month and National Truth & Reconciliation, and emerging new initiatives such as Shine Bright New West and Rest of New West.

* **Auxiliary staff support**, primarily for event day activities - support program coordination functions to support community partner organizations and work with City departments to enable community activations and events focused around diversity, equity, inclusion and anti-racism (DEIAR) priorities - ongoing civic observance and celebrations such as Remembrance Day, Canada Day, Truth & Reconciliation, and emerging new initiatives such as Shine Bright New West and Rest of New West.

These events and activations support opportunities to bring residents and businesses together to learn about each other, explore new experiences and create safe spaces where people can have meaningful interactions throughout the year across all neighborhoods in the City.

Graffiti Abatement

- TBD - reviewing the viability of programs and integrated graffiti management strategies that have been successfully implemented in other municipalities.

Public Art Opportunities

- TBD - preventative strategies to address nuisance graffiti impacting local businesses Downtown such as murals and street art programs.

NEXT STEPS

Given that the demands on public realm in the Downtown have increased since 2018 due to challenges associated with changing demographics, economic development, homelessness and housing affordability, staff recommend the following next steps for Council's endorsement:

- 1) Meet with Downtown stakeholders to review and receive additional feedback on the original 2018 plan for the Fourth Street stairs and Flex Space;
- 2) Review experience from elsewhere on efficient and innovative approaches to programming and maintaining this new public space;
- 3) Generate an update to the 2018 cost estimate for the Fourth Street Stairs and Flex Space from the existing 2022 Approved Capital Budget, by a professional quantity surveyor and bring back to Council the updated project estimate in today’s dollars with the 2023 Proposed Capital Budget.
- 4) Report back to Council with updated information including the plan, budget and timelines for all four initiatives, as part of the 2023 Budget process.

OPTIONS

There are two options for Council’s consideration; they are:

- 1. That Council approve the next steps as outlined in the staff report; or
- 2. Provide staff with different direction.

Option #1 is recommended.

CONCLUSION

The proposed Fourth Street Stairs and Flex Space will strengthen a ‘sense of place’ and connectivity from west to east along the entire mews and from Columbia Street. Improved pedestrian access, additional lighting, flex space and treatment of the hillside will increase a sense of safety and comfort for pedestrians and expand opportunities for the city, partners and local businesses to use the covered space for outdoor markets, vendor stalls and demonstrations, and other uses throughout the year.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1- Overview of Conceptual Design and Precedents

APPROVALS

This report was prepared by:

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This report was approved by:

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