

Tampa Bay Times

Tampa hires design firm for \$8 million makeover at Riverfront Park



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TAMPA — Plans to reshape Julian B. Lane Riverfront Park got a big push forward Thursday when the City Council voted to hire a consulting firm to start planning the project.

The cost of redeveloping the 23-acre park, which is across the Hillsborough River from the David A. Straz Jr. Center for the Performing Arts, has been estimated at \$8 million.

The city will pay Civitas, a landscape and urban design firm based in Denver, \$708,400 to lead the planning effort. The firm has no connection to the Civitas redevelopment plan that was proposed but rejected for Tampa's inner city a decade ago.

Rather, the city hired the firm largely because of its track record on projects such as Museum Park Miami on Biscayne Bay.

Under its contract, Civitas will hold four public workshops to give neighbors from West Riverfront and Old West Tampa a chance to speak their minds and see plans as they take shape. The first of the meetings is expected to take place within 60 days.

"One of the concerns raised early on was to make sure that there was plenty of public input," city economic opportunity administrator Bob McDonough said. "There's actually more opportunities (for public input) here than we usually have."

But the contract cost made several council members pause.

"It's a big park," council member Lisa Montelione said. "It's an important park. I understand that public participation bears a heavy cost to coordinate. But \$708,000 — it's a lot of money."

While details of the plan are open for discussion, Mayor Bob Buckhorn has been clear about a couple of things he wants to see.

First, he likes the idea of moving Laurel Street, which cuts the park in two pieces. Buckhorn wants to reroute Laurel so it hugs the northern edge of the park, next to Interstate 275. That could increase Riverfront's usable space by 5 to 7 acres.

Buckhorn also wants to get rid of the park's large earthen mounds, grassy swales and humps, which he calls "alien space mounds."

Rezoning could enable Heights housing plan

The council gave initial approval to the rezoning and other development approvals for the latest version of the

project known as the Heights.

The project covers 48 acres on the eastern bank of the Hillsborough River, directly across from Blake High School. Plans call for 1,900 multifamily housing units and 260,000 square feet of offices, stores and cafes, plus the reuse of the old red-brick trolley barn as a complex with offices, restaurants, event space on the first floor and a courtyard similar to Jannus Live in St. Petersburg.

As proposed, taller buildings and higher density housing would be south of Palm Avenue. Shorter, lower density housing would be north of Palm.

Developers aim to bring in a grocery store, drugstore and bank branch.

Palm and Highland avenue are planned to include bike lanes and on-street parking, and the Riverwalk would be completed to N Boulevard.

The council's second and final vote on the project is scheduled for 9:30 a.m. Nov. 21.

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