Design firm seeking ways to reduce park cost | The News Desk
Design firm seeking ways to reduce park cost

BY PAMELA GOULD / THE FREE LANCE–STAR

The initial cost estimate for Fredericksburg’s Riverfront Park was between $14 million and $18 million, a principal with the design firm of Rhodeside & Harwell told the City Council during a work session Tuesday.

That estimate included all 22 of the proposed features such as a climbing structure, shade structure, water element, multiple walkways and a mast element that leans toward the Rappahannock River. It also included the preferred materials for aesthetics.

However, Elliot Rhodeside also told the council that when his staff went through a “value engineering” process for the design, the cost was reduced to a little more than $9 million.

The reduced estimate used less-expensive materials, reduced the size of some features such as the water element and shade structure, and eliminated the mast. The mast, the most dramatic feature of the design, was incorporated to draw attention to the river and reflect its critical role in the city’s history.
Rhodeside said the two-step process for estimating the cost is not unusual for this kind of project. He added that the mast is estimated to cost “over a couple million dollars.”

The work session was the council’s first official look at the park design, which has evolved over the year in cooperation with the city’s Riverfront Task Force.

The council touched on the issue of whether the building used as the Prince Hall Masonic Lodge No. 61 at 609 Sophia St. will remain on the 3.6-acre site that sits between the river and Sophia Street.

The city’s Architectural Review Board voted 4–3 to keep the structure, which served an African–American membership, but city staff has recommended razing it and appealed the ARB’s decision. The appeal is to be considered by the council at its Sept. 23 meeting.

The Alexandria-based design firm was hired in December to create the design concept, which currently does not include the lodge but leaves the mound where it stands.

Since undertaking the project, Rhodeside & Harwell’s team has held focus group meetings, two public meetings, solicited input through a survey and met twice with the ARB.

It considered options for including the lodge but with the public’s and task force’s input ultimately decided it did not work.

The two-story structure was built in 1921 by local builder E.G. “Peck” Heflin. It originally served as a residence and later as a site for child care.

The fraternal organization bought the building in March 1972 and months later added brick to the exterior, presumably in response to Hurricane Agnes in June 1972. It sold the building to the city in 2011 with the understanding it could be demolished to make way for the park, Senior Planner Erik Nelson has said.

The council did not take any action on Tuesday but is expected to discuss the park further at its retreat next month, when it will be setting priorities.

In response to a question from Councilman Billy Withers, Rhodeside said he thought a lot about whether there was a way to begin within one section of the park and gradually create it but cautioned about diluting its impact.

“To make effective changes [in an urban area], you need a game changer,” Rhodeside said. That game changer, he said, is what will make the park a magnet to draw people downtown and thus spur the economic impact the city seeks in developing the riverfront.

Mayor Mary Katherine Greenlaw said she agreed with Rhodeside and sees city residents as “solidly behind” a riverfront park but said it would help to have options as the council evaluates it.

“But I don’t want to so phase it that it never gets done,” she added.

Before the council retreat, Rhodeside’s team is to work with the Task Force to come up with options for how the city could move forward and ways to potentially identify elements of the design that might be appropriate to list as opportunities for philanthropic gifts.

“The Task Force and the design team will discuss ramifications of changes to keep the integrity of the design while reducing the cost,” said George Solley, who chairs the Task Force.

Pamela Gould: 540/735-1972
pgould@freelancestar.com

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