

Infrastructure & Community Spaces Lunch & Learn

June 25, 2019

Notes provided by Councilor Kimberly Cook

The Infrastructure and Community Spaces program, at \$58 million, is the most ambitious in the history of Vestavia Hills. It involves risk, opinions and a lot of details to be managed. Before approving the concept and overall budget, the City conducted 27 public meetings and the resulting plan addresses many of the ideas and desires of the community. When you move from the abstract (discussing ideas) to action (hiring architects), you hear, “Well, you forgot about this.” We are no longer in the planning stages, but are in an action phase – this means our ability to make changes is more limited than it was at first.

Infrastructure

Already, we have paved 20 miles of streets – just under 15% of our City’s total road miles. We are implementing 12 drainage projects. We have five major sidewalk projects in the final stages of design. The widening of Crosshaven is moving along – we are almost finished acquiring ROW, with construction projected to start in early 2020.

Cahaba Heights Park

This is an aged park the City inherited through annexation. It was already an older facility, but has now grown quite old and needs to be completely replaced. The site has significant drainage issues. The City is working around the operations of the school as the project moves forward. (Dr. Freeman attended the Lunch & Learn.) It sits between existing, new and future development commercial sites. The park will provide primarily athletic fields, but it will also provide added community resources, including a community park, new senior facility and dog park. We heard what the community wanted and are doing our best to provide the very best. The bid came in under the budgeted price, which meant we were able to accept all supplemental options, including all proposed parking and artificial turf on baseball fields. As we previously had little parking at these ball fields, it became a chaotic situation for parents and spectators – people parking on dirt, getting stuck in mud, etc. The new park will feature an ADA-accessible ramp from upper to lower fields. The field house will be two-level. The plan features new batting cages, bleachers and a clubhouse with a meeting room, restrooms and storage. The one meeting room will provide 500+ sf, which can be rented by the community. The Council has clearly communicated the mandate that residents have access first, with rental and income-producing uses coming second. The senior facility will come in as a separate bid package in September.

Wald Park

The premier green-space and fields at Wald Park have many “neighborhoods.” There is a Great Lawn, which provides (rare) flat land for recreation and greenspace. Site preparation is

complete – we have created a flat entry area with space for pavilions and an amphitheater surrounded by a berm. In the ascending grade-area, we will offer a Nature Discovery area, tennis and the largest dog park in our community. The maintenance building has been moved from prime Highway 31 commercial property location to the “back of the house.” Redeveloping the site provided a prime retail location and moved a service facility to the back of the property. The plan provides 260 primary parking spaces (not including secondary parking at VHEW) instead of our current 191 spaces. In addition, we will have use of school parking, as most athletic events take place after school hours. Likewise, the school can use City parking for their events, so this is a win-win.

The design provides the ability to separate school activities from park activities, creates a sense of entry and stellar view of the park from Highway 31. A retaining wall at the roadway separates school and City functions, providing privacy and separation. The road reconfiguration lines up the park entry road with Round Hill Road, the site of our library. This creates a more rational, visible entry point, instead of the “hidden” entry we have now. The project includes an aquatic center that addresses the bulk of the wishes of the community. The pool constitutes an extreme portion of the development cost, with two pools (one pool was added to the original design), an enhanced pool house and more to fill a need the community stated in surveys as their number one priority.

For the first time, we will have a Miracle League field. In our region, there is no dedicated space for special needs children. Our City Manager has experienced the challenge of finding suitable recreation space for his own special-needs child to participate, a group that is an important part of our community. Adding this field required eliminating one of our larger baseball fields, but the City’s collaboration with our Board of Education has resulted in construction of a larger diamond field at Berry, which will help compensate for the loss of the field at Wald. The field will be a “branded” Miracle League field, which will bring cross-city team competitions and increase use of our park, even from those outside our community.

The park provides flat areas for substantial play structures and safe crossing routes from the school. An entry pavilion will provide hook-ups for food trucks and a place where residents can gather outdoors. The track around baseball fields will be improved and ADA-accessible paths allow free access from any “neighborhood” of the park to another.

Our goal was to meet the needs expressed in our town hall meetings. For our aquatic facility, this has resulted in the design of two pools and 22,000-sf of pool deck space, a maintenance building and expansive pool house.

Throughout the design, architectural features mirror other places in the City, giving a consistent look to our civic buildings and parks.

Community Center

Currently, City Hall is the center of the City functions. With the improvements at Wald Park, the Great Lawn will provide an additional great space for civic activities. For this reason, it is important to link these two areas, so the Community Building provides a walk from the front of City Hall, into the second floor of the Community Center, down a flight of stairs (elevator) to the first floor, connected to a new walking trail to Wald Park. This connectivity for pedestrian and activities is particularly valuable, since we don't have a traditional downtown. The original Gold's Gym building provided 70,000-sf, and our design adds 26,000-sf of court space. By comparison, the current Civic Center is 40,000-sf. The design meets needs that were identified in community surveys, giving us space to provide senior adult and adult programming we have never had before. Plans include space for new recreational volleyball and pickleball play.

Level 1: The blueprint uses blue to denote recreation. Lobby space is designed to serve as civic event space, which will meet existing as well as future demand. There is a designated room (front room to the right, in the drawing) to serve the senior dance program – column-free space with the right flooring. The purple-colored area is Chamber space. Behind the Chamber space is a community conference room. The current pool area will be a two-level space, where indoor inflatables can fit (bounce houses; rock walls) for parties and civic events. The space provides two full-size courts that can be broken down into multiple smaller spaces for volleyball, pickleball and other sports. The plans show the walking path from City Hall to Wald Park. The large banquet spaces means our high school can hold Homecoming and Prom within the City, precluding the need to use other communities' spaces. The banquet hall will seat as many as 650 people at round tables, which is greater than Vestavia Country Club – the largest space in our community.

The kitchen was designed for use by caterers, because this is what event coordinators said is the trend – cooking off-site and bring food in, as opposed to cooking on-site. For example, Trussville has five exclusive vendors users choose from; they know the facility and bring food in.

There is dedicated cardio space that will house 10-15 pieces of equipment and a walking track. The Silver Sneakers program designation requires provision of a minimum of 10 pieces of cardio equipment. The City will hire several new employees to provide expanded senior programming and exercise options. The City does not want to compete with private industry, but we desire to provide new opportunities for our senior residents. We understand our seniors desire places where they can gather for socializing, so we want to provide more than just an exercise facility. We are providing some exercise space, but will also provide multi-purpose rooms for classes, a program which can evolve over time, with the hiring of new personnel (already in the works). We placed an emphasis on flexible space that can meet a variety of needs.

In addition, there is dedicated space for a Vestavia Hills Sports Hall of Fame and an area for the sale of Vestavia Hills spirit wares.

Obviously, the exterior of the building does not match our architectural look, but we will do what is feasible to add features to blend with other civic buildings. The building provides a

covered canopy for pick-up and drop-off and a connection to City Hall. With ample space for events, we will no longer be too cramped to move indoors for rain-outs.

The design provides a glass wall to separate recreation from civic functions.

Status of Projects

We have awarded a contract for the Cahaba Heights Park. Bids for Wald Park will be opened July 2. The Community Center will be bid in August, with a September construction start date.

Questions from Residents:

A resident expressed a concern that the walking track route appeared to intersect with another use area, which might cause collisions and interference with walkers/joggers. The City Manager noted the concern and will address with TCU. The track length is 10 laps = one mile. Mr. Harwell asked about strength training equipment. The City must have at least 10 pieces of cardio equipment to qualify for Silver Sneakers. The City will have an allowance in the bid for equipment purchase and will seek input from residents before deciding. TCU said there is space for strength training equipment in the design.

Will the current indoor pool will be eliminated? The City invested in Wald Park two pools instead of a large outdoor and small indoor pool. The City does not intend to provide a physical therapy program, competing with private providers. Swim lessons and lap swimming can be done at the outdoor facility.

Can the pool be covered with a bubble? A bubble cover is not in the budget for winter access, but this could be added at a later time.

Will there be a splash pad at Wald Park, like SHAC? No, but the pool will have a zero-entry area, with features similar to a splash pad.

For the cardio equipment, will you have to be in Silver Sneakers to use it? No. The Community Center will be open to the public. There may be fees associated with some special programs, but the Park Board makes those decisions. The City desires to provide a low-cost place where residents can enjoy the amenities their tax dollars paid for. The City will not be running a program that requires high fees to make it work. If the City decides to add bells and whistles, there might be some additional charges.

Will facilities and programs only be open to VH residents? The current Park Board rule is you must register for a badge and be a resident. There is no cost for a resident badge. If you live outside VH, you pay a fee. The Council has dictated use of facilities will be for residents first and rental (non-residents) last.

What are the plans for diamond sports if the facilities are not ready in time? There is excess capacity at Liberty Park and we plan to collaborate with Hoover to rent space. They have indicated they will have room for us. The City will know better what we will need six months into the project. If needed, the Park Board will have a Plan B.

Will the 50-meter pool provide the length that is needed for competitive swim meets? Yes. This is the length that is used by competitive swim leagues and no one provides 100-meter pools any longer.

When will the new entry road be completed? The contractor is obligated to finish by October 1 so Baumhower and Dunkin' Donuts can open in their location, the site that previously housed the maintenance facility.

Has there been any consideration for concerns expressed about VHEW use during construction? Due to the need for contractor flexibility in moving dirt from place to place on the site, the City will not be able to guarantee 100% use of playground space by the schools during construction. The school system is making accommodations and the City is still meeting with the Board of Education to discuss the issue.

What playground equipment will be provided at Wald Park? There is a bid package allowance for robust equipment, which will reside in the upper left green-space (as shown on the site plan). In addition, there will be an area for free play in the Nature Discovery area (upper right circle on the site plan) as well as a small flat exercise area for adults. The City will receive a separate bid for just the playground equipment installation.

Will the City tear down Castle Park? Yes, but the contractor is saving the monument (tiled wall with children's handprints) and any placards.

Will the new track around baseball field be asphalt? The resident commented loose gravel is too loose and concrete is too hard. The City Manager noted the concern and mentioned the grade will be improved.

Will the new facilities fulfill the need for more rectangular field space in central Vestavia Hills? The city collaborated with the Board of Education to provide (add) that space, under a joint use agreement with school board. In addition, the front part of the Wald Park green-space can be a practice area as it is flat.

Will there be cross-highway access from the library to Wald Park? There is a long-standing project to build a pedestrian bridge from the library to Wald Park. The City has seen incremental progress towards that goal and we are cautiously optimistic this will occur in the near future. The City has approved design plans and funding for the project and is working with ALDOT to secure bid-letting and start of construction dates.