City of CHAMPAIGN

REPORT TO PLAN COMMISSION

FROM: **Bruce A. Knight, FAICP, Planning and Development Director**

DATE: **September 27, 2024**

SUBJECT: **NEIL STREET PUBLIC REALM IMPROVEMENTS – MEMO ONLY**

The Planning and Development Department is pleased to provide an update on several key projects progressing toward engineering and construction in the North Neil Street area over the coming years. This report outlines the timeline, costs, and communication efforts for the following projects:

- Neil Street Corridor Beautification
- Downtown Plaza Construction
- Reconstruction of Park Avenue from Randolph Street to Neil Street

No formal action is required at this time. This update intends to inform the Plan Commission and other interested parties of project milestones and create an additional opportunity for public input. The attached report and accompanying study session presentation will offer a detailed overview and allow for questions and feedback on project implementation and timelines.

City of CHAMPAIGN

REPORT TO CITY COUNCIL

FROM: **Dorothy Ann David, City Manager**

DATE: **September 6, 2024**

SUBJECT: **PUBLIC REALM IMPROVEMENTS ALONG NORTH NEIL STREET SS 2024-021**

A. Introduction: The purpose of this report is to update Council on design and construction timelines for the Neil Street Corridor (I-74 to Downtown), Downtown Plaza, and Park Avenue (Neil to Randolph) projects. Staff seeks direction to move forward with completion of design work for these projects after incorporating Council comments.

B. Recommended Action: Direct staff to proceed with the design concepts as presented, and construction timelines for the Neil Street Corridor, Downtown Plaza, and Park Avenue projects while addressing any Council comments.

C. Previous Council Actions: See Attachment "A" for a list of prior Council actions.

D. Summary:

- This report covers three geographically linked projects implementing City Council Goals and Comprehensive Plan recommendations: Neil Street Corridor Beautification, Downtown Plaza Construction, and Park Avenue Reconstruction.
- The Neil Street Corridor Improvement Plan, adopted in 2019, recommends land uses, transportation interventions, and beautification strategies based off extensive public input. Lamar Johnson Collaborative has produced an Existing Conditions Report and Concept Design for beautifying the Neil Street Corridor in the near-term.
- Staff is collecting comments on both concepts that Lamar Johnson Collaborative developed and at the end of the comment period will provide those comments to Lamar Johnson for further refinement of the concepts into one final concept.
- The Downtown Plaza project was first identified in the 2006 Downtown Plan and aims to convert a surface parking lot into a civic plaza. Design of the Plaza and elements contained therein were guided by several years of public input culminating with the adoption of the Neil Street Plaza Placemaking Plan as Council Policy in 2019.
- Phase 1 of Plaza construction began in July 2024 and is scheduled to finish in May 2025. Coordination with business owners during construction has resulted in an expanded sidewalk café for Smith Burger, the installation of a crosswalk across Neil Street at Hill, and a temporary sidewalk expansion to mitigate construction impacts on Big Grove's outdoor seating.
- Construction of Phase 2 of the Plaza is anticipated to begin in 2026. Preliminary engineering is anticipated to begin in October 2024. Phase 2 of the Downtown Plaza will complete the project and includes a lighted, pop-jet fountain, small business kiosks, a lawn, lighting and

art elements and more. Phase 2 also addresses mobility and pedestrian safety by rebuilding the Neil and Hill Street intersection and part of Washington Street.

- Park Avenue between Neil and Randolph is a key segment of an east-west pedestrian corridor identified in the 2006 Downtown Plan that connects West Side Park to Downtown and North First Street. Staff have worked closely with an engineering consultant to develop a conceptual redesign for the street to improve its pedestrian-friendliness.
- The conceptual engineering for Park Avenue reconstruction would install tabletop intersections at Neil/Park and Randolph/Park. The road segment between those intersections would be raised to sidewalk level and follow a "curbless" street concept. This and other design elements will enhance the street's pedestrian friendliness and facilitate closures for event programming while keeping on-street parking and accommodating through traffic.
- Staff met with business owners near the Park Avenue project. All expressed excitement with the concept. Some voiced concerns regarding construction timelines and parking impacts and these will be addressed through the construction phasing. Construction is proposed to start and conclude in 2025.

E. Background: While the three projects presented in this study session are functionally distinct, they are geographically linked and implement similar City Council Goals and Comprehensive Plan recommendations.

1. Neil Street Corridor. One of the Key Projects identified in the 2015 – 2017 City Council Goals and Key Projects was to "Prepare a Beautification Plan for the Neil Street Corridor from I-74 to Downtown." As a result, City staff worked with Ratio Architects to develop a Neil Street Corridor Improvement Plan. As part of this planning process, staff conducted a series of neighborhood meetings and study sessions with City Council and Plan Commission to gather resident, business operator, and property owner input about the study area. The culmination of this effort was the Neil Street Corridor Improvement Plan, adopted by City Council as an element of the Comprehensive Plan in 2019. This plan identifies ideal land uses, transportation interventions, and beautification strategies which address input gathered throughout the public engagement process.

a. Update. In December 2023, Council authorized the City Manager to execute a contract with the Lamar Johnson Collaborative to identify near-term beautification strategies to be implemented along the corridor. They have produced an Existing Conditions Report and Concept Design. The Concept Design document is attached to this report and proposes specific landscaping and design interventions at five gateway intersections in the Neil Street Corridor. These interventions would improve the area's aesthetics with a cohesive branding package. This brand features a modern typography and color palette, while using materials that reference the City's railroad history, patina of the City Building, and match the limestone used in stormwater improvements along the Boneyard.

b. Next Steps. The Concept Design document is presented to Council and the public for general feedback. The Concept Design identifies two options for signage, street furnishings, and landscaping. These visuals are conceptual in nature, and Lamar Johnson is looking for feedback from the community to further refine the concepts into a final recommend plan for beautification of the corridor. Staff is working to collect comments through Engage Champaign and neighborhood meetings with the adjacent neighborhoods.

Upon receiving direction, Planning staff would work to refine these beautification strategies and implement them after the corridor's reconstruction. The 10-year Capital Improvement Plan identifies construction funding for a preferred concept in 2028 and 2029. Concurrent with this effort, the Engineering Division of Public Works is developing Phase 1 Construction Plans to implement the road configuration recommendations of the 2019 Neil Street Corridor Plan. That plan recommended a road diet (three-lane cross section with a center turning lane), driveway access consolidation, and enhanced pedestrian crossings. Bike lanes are not contemplated along Neil, as these are present on the State/Randolph (south of Bradley Avenue) and Market Street (from Main Street to Olympian Drive).

2. Downtown Plaza. This project was first identified in the 2006 Downtown Plan in response to public feedback. The Plan proposed converting the surface parking lot at the southeast corner of Washington and Neil into a civic plaza. After several years of public engagement, a Placemaking Plan was adopted in 2019 to advance a vision for what the Plaza could look like. The physical elements of the Plaza were guided by the plan's public engagement process.

a. Update. The first phase of Plaza construction began in July 2024 and is scheduled to conclude in May 2025. This first phase includes new landscaping, tiered bench seating, bench swings, a performing arts stage, improvements to delineation between pedestrian and sidewalk café areas, and improvements to the site's accessibility for patrons with mobility challenges. Engagement with business owners during the construction phase thus far has resulted in the approval of an expanded sidewalk café area for Collective Pour/Smith Burger, the installation of a crosswalk at Hill Street across Neil Street and the installation of a temporary protected walkway in the loading zone on Main Street just south of Big Grove to allow expanded outdoor seating and mitigate the impact to their outdoor seating area on the Plaza.

The second phase of Plaza construction is anticipated to begin in 2026. Preliminary engineering is anticipated to begin in October 2024. Phase 2 of the Downtown Plaza will complete the project. The concept for Phase 2, developed through the Placemaking Plan, includes a lighted, pop-jet fountain, small business kiosks, a great lawn area, specialty lighting features that can change colors and designs seasonally, art elements and more. Phase 2 also addresses mobility and pedestrian safety through the reconstruction of the Neil and Hill Street intersection and reconstruction of Washington Street from Neil to Hickory Street. The City-owned lot south of The Orpheum will also be transformed into a gateway from Fremont Street and the public parking lot at Walnut and Washington Streets as part of Phase 2. The design also includes a curbless one-way southbound drive aisle from Washington Street, following the historic Hickory Street right of way. This feature will allow for event setup at the stage and in the overall Plaza, as well as providing angled parking, a portion of which will be ADA accessible spaces.

b. Next Steps. This information is provided to Council and the public so they may anticipate upcoming construction and stay engaged with the project. Preliminary engineering for Phase 2 of the Plaza has not started. Feedback from City Council and the general public may be received at this and future study sessions or on EngageChampaign.org/Downtown Plaza. Targeted stakeholder engagement will also guide the preliminary design process. During Phase 1, staff collaborated with adjacent business owners, 40North, and local performing

artists on design elements like the stage. Similar engagement will shape the design elements in Phase 2.

3. Park Avenue. The 2006 Downtown Plan, an element of the Comprehensive Plan, identifies an east-west pedestrian corridor that connects West Side Park, Downtown, and North First Street. Park Avenue is a key segment of this corridor and funding has been programmed in the 10-year Capital Improvements Plan to reconstruct Park, between Neil and Randolph, in the summer of 2025. In November 2023, Council authorized the City Manager to execute an agreement to study engineering concepts that would build out this pedestrian corridor. This contract provides conceptual engineering for Park Avenue and Taylor Street improvements. Per the 10-Year Capital Improvements Plan, Food and Beverage revenues would fund reconstruction on Park Avenue in Calendar Year 2025 and Taylor Street in 2028-2029.

a. Update. The engineering concept for Park Avenue is a pedestrian-oriented street that facilitates festival uses such as Friday Night Live or the farmer's market. Intersections at Park and Neil are raised to a tabletop intersection such that pedestrians would not need to step down to cross the street. This elevates the visibility of pedestrians and requires northbound and southbound to slow down to navigate these intersections. The road segment of Park between Neil and Randolph will also be raised to the sidewalk level so there is no difference in elevation between sidewalk and street.

This "curbless" concept accommodates motor traffic but prioritizes pedestrians. Areas for vehicles and pedestrians would be delineated by street furnishing, bollards, and pavement treatments. Access to parking lots on the north and south side of the road segment would be cut off to allow for wider sidewalks and on-street parking. Access for the north lot will be taken off Randolph. String lighting is proposed above the street, similar to Market Street and Taylor Street, to beautify the area and establish a visual cue for the pedestrian corridor. Temporary bollards may be installed in the east and west sides of the Park Avenue segment, so the area could be quickly closed to vehicular traffic for festivals (traffic on Neil and Randolph would not be impeded). Together, the elements of this engineering concept beautify the road, prioritize pedestrians, and facilitate future event setup for Friday Night Live and similar events.

b. Next Steps. Staff are providing the conceptual engineering visuals to Council and the public so they may provide comment, either at this study session or to project manager David Happ. Staff is seeking Council direction on moving forward to complete design based on the presented engineering concepts after incorporating Council comments. The consultants, Clark Dietz and MKSK, are ready to move into the next stage of design. Finishing the engineering over the winter would position the City to bid the project in the spring and target construction in summer/fall of 2025.

Staff also seek Council and public comment on engineering concepts for Taylor, Chester, and Walnut.

F. Alternatives:

1. Direct staff to address Council comments on all projects discussed and:

- refine concepts of the Neil Street Corridor Beautification Strategy; and
- proceed with preliminary design of Phase 2 of the Downtown Plaza, engaging stakeholders and the general public to inform key design elements; and
- finalize design for Park Avenue this winter for reconstruction in the summer of 2025.

2. Direct staff not to proceed with one or more of these projects or provide alternative direction.

G. Discussion of Alternatives:

Alternative 1 would direct staff to address Council comments on all projects discussed and:

- refine concepts of the Neil Street Corridor Beautification Strategy; and
- proceed with preliminary design of Phase 2 of the Downtown Plaza, engaging stakeholders and the general public to inform key design elements; and
- finalize design for Park Avenue in winter 2024/2025 for reconstruction in summer 2025.

a. Advantages

- Furthers several 2023-2025 City Council Goals and Key Projects under "Our City Keeps Our Community Safe," "Our City Builds Safe and Sustainable Infrastructure," and "Our City Supports our Vibrant, Diverse Neighborhoods."
- Would support community center improvements to attract development, improve transportation safety, and support Downtown's role as an active space for residents, workers, and visitors.
- Implements recommendations from the Downtown Plan, the Champaign Moving Forward: Transportation Master Plan, the Neil Street Plaza Placemaking Plan, the Neil Street Corridor Plan, and the Champaign Tomorrow 2021 Comprehensive Plan.

b. Disadvantages

- Construction of Park Avenue will use Food and Beverage revenues as programmed in the Capital Improvements Plan, but those resources could be used to address other City priorities.
- Construction activities could create temporary access barriers and generate noise and dust, affecting adjacent businesses during construction.
- All projects could negatively impact business access and visibility during construction.

Alternative 2 would direct staff not to proceed with one or several of the projects described in this report and would provide further direction to staff.

a. Advantages

- Specific advantages depend on City Council direction. One project could be prioritized over others, implementation could be delayed for more detailed analysis, or additional time could be used for more public input.
- Businesses and residents adjacent to project areas would not be affected by construction or adapt to significant changes if any of these projects did not move forward.

- Resources currently allocated to these projects could be reallocated to other City priorities or used to address any unexpected needs that may arise.

b. Disadvantages

- Delays implementation of City Council Goals and recommendations from the Comprehensive Plan, Downtown Plan, Neil Street Plaza Placemaking Plan, and Neil Street Corridor Improvement Plan.
- Depending on Council direction, current pedestrian safety issues and underutilized spaces in Downtown would remain unaddressed by these projects.
- Project costs could change due to inflation or changing market conditions if these projects are delayed.
- Misses an opportunity for these projects to enhance Downtown's unique identity, bolster the area's economic development, and improve quality of life for residents and visitors.

H. Community Input:

1. Neil Street Corridor. This project has been shaped by extensive community development throughout its development. Three initial designs were presented to the public for feedback. The project team then incorporated these comments into a "preferred alternative." Input was gathered on the preferred alternative in 2018 through neighborhood meetings, study sessions at City Council and Plan Commission, and an open house workshop where around 30 community members provided feedback. Most attendees felt their earlier comments on the three design alternatives were addressed in the preferred option but provided additional comments.

The preferred alternative was further refined to address these comments, and it was shared with the public through a project website and social media. Planning staff continued to gather feedback at neighborhood meetings, via email, and an additional open house at the Champaign Public Library. Recent input supports the plan's concepts and goals, with only minor suggestions regarding the timing of improvements.

This study session presenting Lamar Johnson Collaborative's beautification concepts is another opportunity for City Council, Plan Commission, and the general public to provide input. There is also an EngageChampaign.org site dedicated to the Neil Street Corridor where interested parties may remain apprised of project updates and provide input to staff. A survey has been posted on this website to collect public feedback on the design concepts for Neil Street Corridor Beautification. This input will inform the final recommendation for City Council approval and final design from consultants.

2. Downtown Plaza. The Neil Street Plaza Placemaking Plan effort included 14 pop-up booths at established community events, stakeholder meetings, project-specific meetings, and online surveys. Residents and visitors of all ages appreciated the idea of a place to 'just be' in Downtown, with features like a fountain, bench swings, shaded seating, and a performance stage. Some participants opposed the loss of parking in original designs for the Plaza. In response, the final design includes angled parking on the east side of the Plaza (historic Hickory Street), angled parking on Washington Street, and parallel parking on Neil Street, north of Hill Street. The City also plans to transform its vacant lot south of The Orpheum into a gateway between the

Plaza and the underutilized parking lot south of Washington Street between Fremont Street and Walnut Street.

Recently, Phase 1 outreach included representatives from Experience Champaign-Urbana, Champaign Rotary, 40North, Champaign Center Partnership, specialists from the University of Illinois Center on Health, Aging and Disability, local musicians, and special events organizers. Their feedback has influenced the design to follow a 'belonging-centered' philosophy facilitating navigation within the space and increasing comfort for all users.

This summer, Planning and Development staff conducted outreach for the Downtown Plan. Feedback expressed excitement for the Downtown Plaza and appreciation for event programming downtown. City staff from the Public Works and Planning and Development have met with several business owners and operators to coordinate construction and mitigate impacts. This resulted in a modified construction timeline, installation of temporary access points, and expanded sidewalk café areas. Staff will continue to coordinate with nearby businesses throughout the construction process. Interested parties may view design and plan documents, construction updates, and contact project managers on EngageChampaign.org.

3. Park Avenue. Staff have met with property owners and business operators near the project. Early in the summer, discussions with Busey Bank centered on access to their parking lots to the north and south of Park Street. Busey is amenable to closing Park Avenue accesses. A new access point off Randolph will be built for the north lot while the south lot will maintain its access to Randolph. Hamilton Walker's was contacted early on as they will be most impacted by the street's redesign. They had favorable views of the project and requested that the street's redesign accommodate a sidewalk café on the south side of their restaurant.

Planning and Public Works staff held nine meetings with business owners near the project in July 2024. Staff presented the engineering concepts attached to this report and incorporated business owner comments and concerns before moving from conceptual engineering to preliminary design. All business owners interviewed expressed excitement for the project, traffic calming, and favorably viewed programming such as Friday Night Live.

Two businesses expressed concern regarding the loss of on-street parking (35 spaces to 24 spaces). Two other businesses asked why there would be any on-street parking. Staff recommend proceeding with the current engineering concept that retains some on-street parking and helps businesses coordinate parking needs during construction. This discussion led some business owners to inquire about renting spaces from nearby private lots long-term.

Business owners requested daytime programming on Park Avenue, rather than just on weekend nights. Many expressed frustration with the pavers on sidewalks near Neil and were excited for a concrete surface improvement. Some concern was voiced regarding the construction timeline's effect on outdoor sidewalk café business. Business owners requested that construction on the Neil Street sidewalk and intersection finish in March, or occur in June/July, as April and May were the months when sidewalk cafés generated most revenue. Three business owners also wondered if pedestrian-activated lights at the Randolph and Neil intersections would improve pedestrian safety.

I. Budget Impact: Together these projects cost $24,459,360. Most of this is funded through Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) grants ($12.5MM) for the Downtown Plaza. Securing this funding would not have been possible without the help of Senator Faraci and the late Senator Bennett. About one-fifth of funding comes from the Food and Beverage tax fund ($5.185MM) for Park Avenue reconstruction. The remainder comes from the Capital Improvement Fund and the Downtown Fringe TIF for the Downtown Plaza, and the Bristol Park TIF for Neil Street Corridor Beautification. Project costs by year and fund, derived from the 10-Year Capital Improvements Plan, are shown in the below tables.

Neil Street Corridor Beautification Cost ($1,050,000) by Funding Source, Calendar Year

Description	Fund	2024	2028	2029
Professional Services	Bristol Park TIF	$50,000		
Construction	Bristol Park TIF		$500,000	$500,000
Total		$50,000	$500,000	$500,000

Proposed Downtown Plaza Costs ($18,224,360) by Funding Source, Calendar Year

	Description	Fund	2024	2025	2026	2027
Phase 1	City Engineers	Downtown Fringe TIF	$57,363	$44,496		
	Professional Services	Downtown Fringe TIF	$273,141			
	Professional Services	Downtown Fringe TIF	$429,275			
	Construction	Capital Improvement		$3,000,000		
	Construction	DCEO Grant		$500,000		
Phase 2	City Engineers	Downtown Fringe TIF		$50,000	$350,000	$175,000
	Professional Services	Downtown Fringe TIF		$1,000,000	$345,085	
	Professional Services	DCEO Grant			$944,915	
	Construction	DCEO Grant			$11,055,085	
	Total		$759,779	$4,594,496	$12,695,085	$175,000

Park Avenue Reconstruction Costs ($5,185,000) by Funding Source, Calendar Year

Description	Fund	2024	2025	2026
City Engineers	Food &Beverage	$39,833	$45,587	$125,000
Professional Services	Food &Beverage	$720,000	$540,000	
Activity-Specific Supplies	Food &Beverage	$167	$114,413	
Construction	Food &Beverage		$2,000,000	$1,600,000
Total		$760,000	$2,700,000	$1,725,000

J. Staffing Impact: Approximately 995 hours of staff time from various departments have led to the status of these three projects. Roughly 1,150 hours of staff time will be required to implement the projects as proposed.

1. Downtown Plaza. Approximately 600 hours of Planning and Development, Public Works, Legal, and Finance staff time was used to conduct the planning process for the Neil Street Placemaking Plan, prepare its adoption, manage design work, grant applications, and project

coordination. Moving forward, the Engineering Division of Public Works will need approximately 900 hours to manage the Plaza's design and construction.

2. Neil Street Corridor. Approximately 315 hours of staff time from the Planning and Development, Public Works, and Neighborhood Services Departments were used to staff public workshops and develop the Neil Street Corridor Improvement Plan. Approximately 200 hours of staff time from the Planning and Development, Legal, and Public Works Departments has been dedicated to gathering and providing information requested to start the Neil Street Corridor Beautification project, participate in the existing conditions analysis, and review consultant deliverables. Collecting and reviewing public input on the design concepts then preparing documents for Council approval will take approximately 40 hours of staff time.

3. Park Avenue. Approximately 80 hours of staff time from the Planning and Development and Public Works departments has been spent towards onboarding and managing an engineering consultant, conducting existing conditions analyses, and meeting with business and property owners adjacent to the proposed project to incorporate their concerns into preliminary design. The Engineering section of Public Works has allocated 250 hours of staff time to manage the design phase of this project.

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Attachments:

A: Prior Council Actions
B: Location Map and Project Timelines
C: Neil Street Corridor Beautification Strategies Concept Design
D: Renderings of Downtown Plaza Phase 1
E: Engineering Concept for Park Avenue Reconstruction