

Joliet Council approves downtown redevelopment plan

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By Grace Tucker

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Concept creates 'urban square' on Chicago Street

By Marney Simon | Enterprise Staff

The Joliet City Council has given the thumbs up to a concept plan that would redefine the city's downtown and turn one of its most recognizable roadways into a destination.

On June 19, the members of the City Council unanimously approved a resolution adopting the Chicago Street Corridor Plan.

Director of Planning Michael Schwarz explained the concept plan to members of the council before the vote, noting that the plan calls to redesign, upgrade and create green space along more than 11 blocks along Chicago Street, from Ruby Street to Washington.

"Step one is where we are now," Schwarz said. "This is a concept. This is not the final design, there will still be opportunities for the public and for the stakeholder groups... as well as the council to finalize some of the details. The next phase, if, hopefully we can budget for that for this coming budget cycle, would be a design development, where we get into what colors there are, what materials, the actual fun part of the design."

Schwarz said the concept plan lays out uses along the corridor, but that actual details come in the next phase. Engineering and design documents then follow.

The design features an urban square across from the Rialto Square Theater inside what is now vacant land and a parking area.

Schwarz noted that the downtown area already hosts multiple events attracting 9,000 to 10,000 people to each, including the Festival of Lights parade, Star Wars Day, and Rock the Block.

"This is sort of formalizing that space to be one of the more special places in Joliet," Schwarz said.

The city's downtown plan first identified a public improvement program and key projects including the reconnection of Chicago street between Jefferson street and Washington street back in 2015.

In 2016, the city applied for a local technical assistance Grant from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) to retain a consulting team for the project. That grant was received in November of that year.

An advisory committee comprised of various downtown stakeholders met several times to review the plans and provide feedback, and a public forum was held in April 2018.

Key elements of the design include a large green space, a flexible stage and raised seating platform, and a “red carpet” pavement connecting the Rialto Square Theater to the park space. The concept plan includes a library garden, a story teller corner, a water feature, unique lighting, seating nooks, and space for future large scale public art.

Chicago street served as part of the original path of Route 66.

Other downtown projects completed or underway include the Gateway Center, the Will County Justice Center, and the JJC City Center campus.

With approval from the city council the next phase is design development. During that phase funding and a schedule will be determined. Construction document bids and construction will follow.

Per the concept plan, the square will be a vibrant all season gathering place in the heart of downtown, combining greenery to a significantly hardscaped downtown.

The new site will be anchored by historic buildings including the Joliet Public library constructed in 1876, the Rialto Square Theatre constructed in 1926, and the University of Saint Francis downtown facility.

The site will be appropriate for festivals, special events, and art installations.

Councilman Larry Hug said he would like to see the city reach out across all wards, and not just those residents and stakeholders closest to the downtown area, since the entire city has an investment in the city and development.