



Committee of the Whole Report For the Meeting of July 18, 2019

To: Committee of the Whole **Date:** July 4, 2019
From: Andrea Hudson, Acting Director, Sustainable Planning and Community Development
Subject: Centennial Square Action Plan - Update Report

RECOMMENDATION

That Council endorse the results of the Centennial Square Action Plan process to date to guide future operations and maintenance.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to bring forward work undertaken to date on the Centennial Square Action Plan. The Downtown Public Realm Plan adopted in 2017 identifies Centennial Square as a priority public realm improvement, specifically to activate and energize the Square, to make it more welcoming and safe, and more child and family friendly. As part of implementation of the Downtown Public Realm Plan, the City initiated a planning process in early 2018 to develop an Action Plan for Centennial Square to address immediate operations, accessibility and maintenance issues, identify programming and other 'quick win' opportunities to activate the plaza, and develop a vision and strategic framework to guide phased and more comprehensive improvements over the medium and long-term.

To date, the process has resulted in over 1400 individual responses from community stakeholders for improving the Square. The approach for this process focused (in Phase 1) on existing and desired experiences of the space rather than technical solutions. Conceptual design options were generated during an Ideas Jam (Phase 2), where a vision was explored to inform more comprehensive medium and long-term actions.

This process has led to recommended short term improvements focused on improving already-existing elements of the Square that carry potential. These include better and more seating opportunities, more interactive play elements, options for active edges with temporary kiosks and vendors, and a focus on lighting and cleanliness of the space to improve aesthetics and perceptions of safety.

Phase 3 of the project (the final phase) has not yet been undertaken. This phase was to include preparation of a draft Action Plan to support ongoing operations and maintenance and allow for an incremental but cohesive Square refresh and redevelopment over time. Given the City's priorities noted in the Strategic Plan 2019-2022, this project has been placed on hold, and staff recommend using the work completed to date to inform immediate maintenance needs.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to bring forward work completed to date on the Centennial Square Action Plan project including an overview of outcomes and public and stakeholder consultation.

BACKGROUND

Every great city has a public square where people gather for civic gathering, public celebration, play, or come for quiet contemplation; a place where public life happens. Centennial Square is Victoria's main civic, ceremonial and recreational plaza and serves as a venue for different events and large public gatherings including ceremonies, demonstrations, displays of public art, theatre and music performances, cultural festivals and local markets.

Centennial Square was constructed in the mid 1960s as part of a major initiative to preserve, restore and revitalize downtown Victoria, and to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the incorporation of the City of Victoria. At the time of its development, Centennial Square was recognized internationally for its pioneering and progressive design, combining timeless principles of good urban design, contextual modernist architecture and the adaptive reuse of heritage conservation, which distinguished Victoria from other North American cities attempting to renew their downtowns through large scale demolition to make way for more car-oriented urbanism. Significant renovations to the Square have occurred over the years including the addition of the CRD building and plaza constructed in 2006, removal of the MacPherson Theatre restaurant annex, and a major renovation to the west part of the Square in 2009 as part of the BC Spirit Square Program, including removal of the knot garden in place of an outdoor stage with canopy, seating, Spirit Poles and landscaping.

Today, outside of when there are events and festivals, activity in the Square is lacking, and, for many people, the Square feels unwelcoming and unsafe. Furnishings, materials and infrastructure, including the fountain and some of the mature trees and landscaping, are aging and will require maintenance and repairs over the short to medium term. At the same time, improvements are required to make the Square more universally accessible for people of all ages and abilities.

The Downtown Public Realm Plan adopted in 2017 identifies Centennial Square as a priority public realm improvement, specifically to improve activation, make it a more child and family-friendly space, improve the capacity for events, and identify opportunities to improve connections. As part of implementation of the Downtown Public Realm Plan, staff initiated a planning process in early 2018 to develop an Action Plan for Centennial Square to:

- address immediate operations and maintenance issues, including accessibility improvements;
- confirm programming and 'quick win' opportunities to activate the plaza;
- provide conceptual design for a plaza 'refresh' and phased implementation over the short to medium term; and
- develop a long term strategic framework for more comprehensive redevelopment of the parkade structure.

Planning and Engagement Process

The Centennial Square Action Plan was to be developed through a 3-phase process with opportunities for public and stakeholder engagement in each:

- Phase 1: Analysis, Vision and Goals (completed in August 2018)
- Phase 2: Design Ideas and Concepts (completed in September 2018)
- Phase 3: Priorities, Actions, Draft Action Plan (not yet undertaken).

A stakeholder working group was established to collaborate and provide input and feedback at key stages throughout the process. The working group included representation from arts and festival groups, downtown residents, walkability and placemaking groups, business groups, social service and advocacy groups, tourism, and heritage. Engagement with the broader public focused on issues, opportunities and desired experiences along with priorities and activities to inform future design improvements. The process was led by City staff and supported by consultant expertise in the areas of architecture, landscape architecture and urban design, specifically Franc D'Ambrosio (DAU), Derek Lee (PWL Partnership) and architect Diana Studer. Ms. Studer has specific expertise in creation of intergenerational, socially inclusive and child/youth friendly spaces, and led a children's charrette for Centennial Square in 2017, the results of which were integrated into this process and summary report is attached.

Phase 1 (completed in August 2018):

- A workshop with the stakeholder working group to identify key themes (June 2018)
- Five pop-up public events in Centennial Square (July 2018)
- An online public survey that collected input (July 2018)
- One-on-one meetings with key stakeholder groups including: McPherson Theatre, Accessibility Working Group, and Heritage Advisory Panel, and more informally with users of the square (July-August 2018)
- Youth engagement with UVIC Urban Geography students and Youth Council (July-August 2018)
- Public Life Field Survey (Adapted from Jahn Gehls Tools for Measuring for Public Life)
- Online engagement through Twitter, Facebook and Instagram (July to September 2018)

Phase 2 (completed in September 2018):

- Ideas Jam Design Workshop with the stakeholder working group.
- 'Public Pin-up' where preliminary design concepts and ideas developed were presented for public input and feedback.
- Report summarizing workshop results and public and stakeholder feedback.

Phase 3 (not yet undertaken) was to include Council consideration of key priorities and actions resulting from the process to date, final community and stakeholder engagement and development of the Action Plan for consideration of approval.



Engagement Highlights:

- 479 responses from people at pop-up events in the Square
- 1,005 survey responses
- 2,792 social media interactions
- 12 design ideas/solutions informed by public and stakeholder input from the Ideas Jam with the stakeholder working group and public open house

The Centennial Square Action Plan process was paused in November 2018 to enable Council to set new priorities in the context of the 2019 – 2022 Strategic Planning process. In December 2018,

Council directed staff to report back on the work completed to date on this project. Please refer to the attachments which summarize project progress:

- A. Public Engagement Summary Report - A report summarizing public engagement approach and methodology including outcomes and results to date.
- B. Statement of Significance Report - An assessment and documentation of heritage significance
- C. Opportunities and Big Ideas Report - A summary of issues, opportunities and big ideas based on the inventory and analysis and public and stakeholder input; A renewed vision statement and set of goals and objectives for the square
- D. Design Framework and Directions report - A summary of ideas and concepts generated at a 2-day design workshop that included input from stakeholders and the public.
- E. Engagement with Children – Summary Report – results of children’s charrette for Centennial Square in 2017
- F. Design Concept – Plaza Refresh
- G. Inventory and Analysis Report

ISSUES AND ANALYSIS

Issues and considerations presented below are a synthesis of phase 1 inventory and analysis report along with public engagement input.

1. Key Issues and Considerations

- Comfort and safety: Outside of times of increased activity such as events and festivals, the square feels unwelcoming and is perceived unsafe for many. A lack of active edges and therefore people passing through and not staying in, poor site lines in and out of the square and perceived negative behaviour contribute to this feeling. Poor lighting, particularly around the perimeter/entries, further reduces perceived safety at night. A lack of aesthetic quality was also identified as detracting from the comfort of the square. Space is well protected from traffic and noise but one that lacks reasons and amenities to stay.
- Connectivity: The Square is well connected to the street network and easily accessible by all transport modes, yet it is generally perceived to lack a sense of arrival. Specifically, a strong connection to, and sense of arrival from, Douglas Street was identified as a key opportunity for improving visual and physical connections. Further, some desire lines and pathways through the square are impeded by some of the vertical elements in the square such as the fountain and its infrastructure, some of the planters, curb and retaining wall around the lawn/sequoia area, and some other physical barriers.



- Daily activity: People tend to pass through, rather than spend time in the square due to a lack of active building edges, opportunities for recreation and play, or other types of passive programming. Some people gather on the lawn areas, both, by Spirit Square and Sequoia tree. The Orcas public art installation appears to be popular with children and families when they come.
- Diversity and inclusion: The Square currently plays an important role as a social gathering space for homeless, street youth and other marginalized populations. Break dancing, roller skating, and other informal arts and culture activities also occur in the square. Discussions with some of these user groups indicated the importance of the space for social gathering and safety for populations who might not have other places to go.
- Special events and programming: All organized festivals, markets, protests and other events in the Square are successful and well attended and enjoyed by residents and visitors. However, the current configuration of the square limits the overall flexibility and adaptable use of the square for medium and larger size events with varying programming and space needs. Further, the current stage design and configuration is very limiting and not suited for most current or desired future events in the square.
- Accessibility: There is a pressing need for improving accessible connections between different levels of the Square which now is not up to code in some areas.
- Operations and maintenance: Quality of paving is poor overall with need for heavy maintenance or replacement (excluding Spirit Square area that was improved in 2009), including the most recent temporary patch of asphalt after tree removal at the City Hall entrance.
- Landscape and greenspace: The Square features a number of mature Oak and Maple mature trees which are mostly in good health. However, some trees are showing signs of stress including the Sequoia Tree, which had suffered damage (from decorative lighting hardware) in recent years and is being monitored, and a maple tree that was recently removed due to instability.
- Heritage: Some elements of the Square have significant meaning and symbolism and form an important part of the identity of the city. Identifying and restoring important heritage components of the square while allowing the square to evolve to accommodate changing needs and new opportunities was identified as an important opportunity.

2. Opportunities and Big Ideas

- Better amenity offerings, such as retail, café or other uses to activate and create 'eyes on the square' year-round and throughout the day and into the evening to make the square feel more welcoming, safe and inclusive.
- Improve cohesiveness for landscaping, accessibility and wayfinding: the square feels disjointed and needs to feel like a more unified space to be in and move through.
- Improve flexibility, openness and adaptability of the square to support a range of event and festival needs. Adaptively re-use/retrofit the fountain to maintain it as a central feature and focal point while allowing better permeability, adaptable use and water play.

- Provide more passive programming. Allow for more interesting seating options, more intimate activities, small retail and tactical/temporary installations that promote arts, culture and play.
- Rethink the undercroft. Convert the undercroft area into a more interactive, active and safe space while maintaining visual and physical connectivity through it.
- Keep the square clean including surfaces and building facades (note: there is already an extensive maintenance program in place).
- Improve connection to Douglas Street to invite people in. Create a more open and inviting interface to allow more seamless visual and physical connections from Douglas Street.
- Activate the edges through both temporary pop-up uses and use ground floor frontage of the parkade for publicly-oriented active uses. Create a gateway and welcoming feature from Broad Street through programming and activation of the undercroft.
- Encourage people to stay. Provide more social seating and activities that will invite people to stay and watch or play.
- Provide more green space. Improve the lawn area or provide more of it to create an 'urban oasis' for passive recreation.

3. Draft Design Directions and Strategies

The Centennial Square Action Plan process to date including analysis, workshops and public engagement led to creation of a design framework and strategies that informed a draft concept plan.

1. Short-term 'quick-win' actions and programming that could be implemented as part of regular operations and maintenance and cultural programs to respond to immediate issues and opportunities. Directions and ideas for short term improvements included:

Better seating

- Adapt existing planter edges to continuous seating / bench including opening up raised platform area with seating steps.
- Extend timing and number of movable tables and chairs to populate bigger area, add picnic tables.
- Improve lawn areas – remove brick curb at the upper lawn to improve access.
- Add seating platform at City Hall entrance area to mitigate heaving issue.

Play

- Use upper terrace for interactive play such as sound room.
- Use blank theatre wall for outdoor movie night.
- Introduce playful seating elements.

Active edges

- Bring semi-permanent kiosks for short-term rotational businesses. Convert undercroft area into pop-up art gallery for artists.

Access/ Transparency

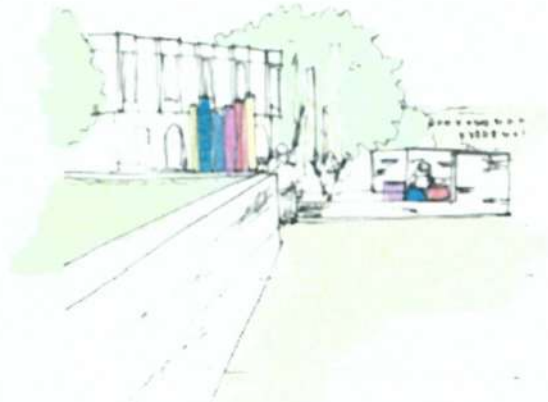
- Add lighting – use catenary lighting and lantern style lights to brighten and animate space year round.
- Trim or remove the Sequoia tree for better visual connection to Douglas Street.

Maintenance

- Paint Parkade and Undercroft.
- Repair the fountain monoliths.



Example partial enclosure of undercroft for art gallery



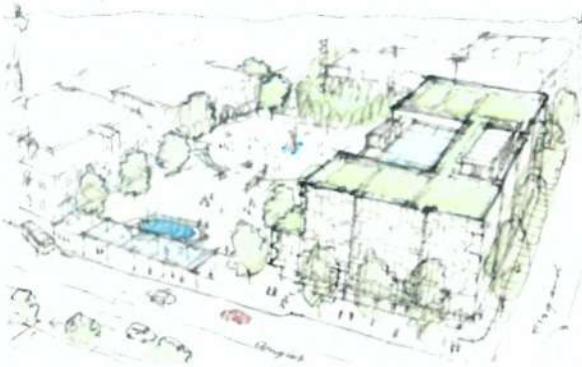
Example of sound room / interactive play

2. Long-term 'big moves' or more comprehensive improvements envisioned for the square as a framework to guide incremental, phased improvements and upgrades, including the eventual redevelopment of the parkade structure.

Directions and ideas for long-term improvements include:

- investigating the redevelopment of the Parkade building and offices building. Future uses would require feasibility study but some discussed included civic uses such as a library or a community centre
- creating a simplified and formal civic space with more seamless physical and visual connections into, out of and within the square
- flexible and adaptable design to support a diversity of year-round activities, events and programming
- ensuring high quality design and materials and incorporating ample seating, accessible grades and appropriately located shelter for year-round comfort
- incorporating active edges through use and design of existing and new buildings to support vitality throughout the day and year round. This could include repurposing the stage area to a commercial pavilion

- incorporating elements of play using water, furniture and art to create a more welcoming, fun and adaptable environment for children and families



Parkade redevelopment concept



More simplified, flexible use plaza with central ramp

4. Design Concept –Plaza Refresh (Attachment F)

A draft design concept was developed based on the feedback received and in response to immediate operations and maintenance needs and incorporation of accessible grades. The design concept illustrates incremental improvements that would happen in advance of any major redevelopment of the parking structure and adjacent open space. Please refer to Attachment F for more details and design drawings.



Plaza refresh design concept – stairs and upper plaza section



Design

The site design is premised on improving mobility, access and safety in the Square as well as providing more places to play, rest and encourage people to stay. It focuses on using existing infrastructure to improve the square. Key design features include:

- generous sloped access from City Hall to central area to improve pedestrian connection through the square
- rest, shade and play zone in central terrace area with seating steps, area for movable furniture, in ground trees and playable seating with potential for water feature and play installations
- active edges - introduction of 3 commercial kiosk opportunities: at the upper terrace, enclosed stage area and undercroft

- central water feature / splash park with preservation of the monoliths as a focal element and centerpiece
- addition of seating with adaptation of existing walls, seat-able edges
- open Lawn at upper terrace
- Transit Hub – Large canopy at Douglas Street that accommodates weather protection, bus wait zone and extensive bike parking with potential for additional commercial kiosk.

Objectives achieved by this design directly correspond to the key issues and considerations collected throughout this process. Key objectives include:

- improved accessibility for all
- improved visibility to and from Douglas Street
- improved safety with activation at different times of the day and in different areas
- more urban play
- urban forest - more and healthier trees
- more usable open green space
- improved flexibility for events and festivals
- better public life.

Implementation and phasing

Please refer to attachment F for illustrations and more details on phasing.

- **Phase 1** includes the central steps and upper terrace area and would be implemented as part of scheduled and already funded operations and maintenance work, including incorporation of an accessible ramp, tree replacement, grading, drainage, lighting and surface improvements and introduction of a commercial kiosk.
- **Phase 2** includes the central plaza zone with a water feature, paving and seating upgrades. It would be implemented under the existing operations and maintenance program due to aging infrastructure of the fountain which is already requiring extensive maintenance.
- **Phase 3** includes enclosure of two key areas and adaptation for commercial use. This can be achieved in number of ways, including short-term pop-up activations and food trucks to a full architectural upgrades. A feasibility study will be necessary to determine the options and costing.
- **Phase 4** includes the upper terrace area by Douglas Street with a revised lawn area extended, including a consideration of the future of the sequoia tree and new transit hub station/ canopy and bike parking.

Operations and maintenance

The area around the stairs and upper terrace is in need of various safety and infrastructure life cycle replacements. Items requiring immediate attention are listed below:

- hard surface replacement to remove trip hazards and liability
- restoration of failing drainage at south side of the square
- installation of the accessible ramp
- potential renewal of underground services
- lifecycle replacement of pathway lighting
- explore opportunities for tree plantings to increase canopy coverage.

OPTIONS & IMPACTS

It is recommended that Council endorse the preliminary results of the Centennial Square Action Plan and the draft plaza refresh concept.

Staff is in the planning stages of the life-cycle replacement work identified above and developing a plan and scope to initiate this partial refresh project. Timeline for this work will be developed as part of the project plan.

Accessibility Impact Statement

Over the course of the analysis completed in the past year, including feedback from residents, staff have identified opportunities to improve access to and within the Square. Input was received from the Accessibility Working Group (AWG) as a result of a site meeting on September 9, 2018. Feedback on existing conditions helped to inform some of the big moves developed as part of the design jam. Outside of the Action Plan process, improved lighting as well as the integration of an accessible ramp connecting the upper and lower plaza are planned improvements to the plaza. Concepts developed were premised on incorporating this ramp more seamlessly as part of a more cohesive design that address multiple objectives including universal accessibility.

Impacts to Financial Plan

Funding for engineering studies and preconstruction work to undertake priority maintenance works around the stairs and upper terrace has been allocated as part of the 2019 budget. Further to the planned maintenance work, there are no financial impacts resulting from the Action Plan at this stage. The outcomes of the process to date do not formally commit the City to any specific capital works, and additional funds for plan implementation are not being sought at this time.

Future works will be identified and scoped for inclusion in future financial planning processes for consideration by Council.

Official Community Plan Consistency Statement

The Centennial Square Action Plan aligns closely with the goals of the Official Community Plan by contributing to downtown vibrancy, walkability, arts and culture, inclusivity, community health and well-being, environmental sustainability and resiliency.

CONCLUSIONS

At its inception, Centennial Square was a showcase for urban design and downtown revitalization, and created a civic and social focal point for public life in Victoria. Today, outside of special events, the Square generally is perceived as unwelcoming and lacks activity, social diversity and reasons to stay. While special event programming has been successful to temporarily, activate the Square, its layout and configuration and lack of adaptability/flexibility poses challenges for hosting diversity of programmed events and festivals. Physical elements such as surfaces and furnishings and other infrastructure are also showing their age and are in need of significant maintenance and restoration over the short to medium term.

The action plan process has been highly collaborative to date with public and stakeholder engagement occurring at key stages, and generating over 1500 individual responses. Within the context of the long-term vision, the directions from the process to date are intended to guide on-

going maintenance, operations and programming. Although, this process completed 2 out of 3 phases, the information collected and summarized will be available for a more comprehensive master plan process in future.

Respectfully submitted,



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Community Planning



Andrea Hudson
Acting Director
Sustainable Planning and Community Development

Report accepted and recommended by the City Manager



Date:

July 12, 2019

List of Attachments

- Attachment A: Engagement Summary
- Attachment B: Statement of Significance Report
- Attachment C: Opportunities and Big Ideas report
- Attachment D: Draft Design Framework and Directions Report
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- Attachment F: Design Concept – Plaza Refresh
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