



ADMINISTRATIVE REPORT

Report Date: January 16, 2019
Contact: Margaret Wittgens
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RTS No.: 12948
VanRIMS No.: 08-2000-20
Meeting Date: February 13, 2019

TO: Standing Committee on City Finance and Services
FROM: General Manager of Engineering Services
SUBJECT: 800 Robson Plaza Update

RECOMMENDATION

- A. THAT Council direct staff to continue with delivery of the 800 Robson Plaza, providing a place for connection, artistic expression, and recreation in the heart of the city.
- B. THAT, subject to approval of Recommendation A, Council approve a capital project and corresponding multi-year capital project budget and 2019 Annual Capital Expenditure of \$5,380,000 for 800 Robson Plaza Upgrade; source of funding to be:
 - a. \$4.25 million Development Cost Levy (DCL) from the 2019-2022 Capital Plan (Transportation); and
 - b. Reallocation of \$1.13 million TransLink funding from the 2019 Active Transportation Corridors & Spot Improvements program.

REPORT SUMMARY

In December 2018, through the 2019 Budget approval, Council deferred the approval for 800 Robson Plaza and directed staff to seek partner funding. This report brings forward more information on project and stakeholder considerations and a recommended funding approach to deliver the project in 2019, which includes regional and senior government external funding opportunities. In light of the importance of this public space, strong stakeholder support and project readiness for delivery, staff are recommending moving the project forward in 2019.

COUNCIL AUTHORITY/PREVIOUS DECISIONS

On April 20, 2016, Council approved the closure of 800 Robson Street to motor vehicle traffic and the creation of a permanent public plaza, and directed staff to initiate a process for the design, construction and long term management of the plaza and report back to Council by December 2016.

In December 2016, Council received for information the conceptual design of the plaza at 800 Robson with funding from the capital budget for the detailed design.

On December 18, 2018, City Council approved the 2019 Capital budget which included the following areas as priorities:

- Continuing to build vibrant communities and public spaces that support arts, culture and the environment; and
- Meeting our commitments to provide safe and healthy workplaces and public spaces

Council deferred the approval of funding recommended in the 2019 Capital Budget for the 800 Robson Plaza and directed staff to seek partner funding.

CITY MANAGER'S/GENERAL MANAGER'S COMMENTS

The City Manager recommends approval of the foregoing.

General Manager of Planning Urban Design and Sustainability

As downtown continues to grow with more residents, businesses and visitors each year, there will be increased demand on public spaces. Delivering a permanent plaza at 800 Robson Street fills a vital public space need in Vancouver, with important social, cultural, and civic functions. The recently undertaken Public Space and Public Life Study has validated that 800 Robson is bustling with public life and is one of the most visited spaces in the city. This demonstrates the incredible success of the current temporary measures that are in place, but also highlights the need for a permanent design for the plaza. A permanent, high quality public realm at 800 Robson will serve to benefit our health, generate economic activity and foster improved social connections.

REPORT

Background/Context

The 800 block of Robson Street and the larger three-block Robson Square and Law Court complex is a city-serving public space with high social and cultural value, and a regional destination drawing residents and visitors to the heart of the city.

During the early 1970s, local architect Arthur Erickson was commissioned by the Province to redefine Blocks 51, 61, and 71, in the heart of downtown Vancouver (Figure 1). Erickson and his team's landmark public space development introduced Vancouver to a new civic cultural centre, bringing much needed open space to the downtown core. Now, 35 years later, the design for the

permanent public plaza at 800 Robson will tie Robson Square and the Law Courts together as Erickson had originally envisioned, connecting a unique and world class series of public spaces.

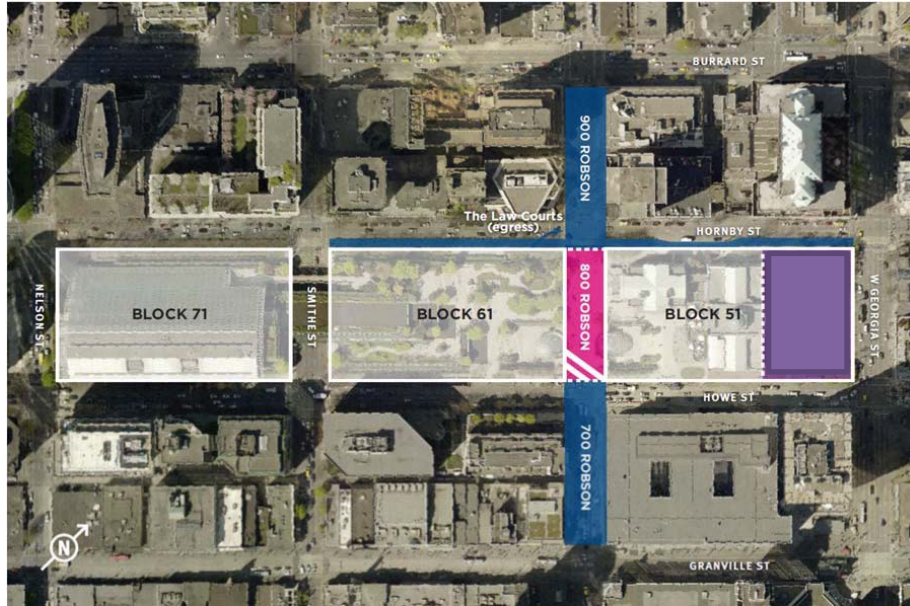


Figure 1: Map showing 800 Robson in the context of Block 51, 61, and 71.

Previous Public and Stakeholder Engagement

Consultation for the future of 800 Robson has been ongoing since 2011, and has consistently identified a strong public desire to recognize and formalize this space as a signature central gathering space as originally envisioned by Arthur Erickson.

Following the decision to create a permanent plaza at this location in 2016, staff engaged the public and key stakeholders on a permanent plaza at 800 Robson. The intent was to gain input from a wide cross section of users and stakeholder groups, including UBC Robson Square, Vancouver Art Gallery, Downtown and Robson Street Business Improvement Associations, the Province, public, Urban Design Panel and the Arthur Erickson Foundation. The conducted surveys illustrate strong support for the transformation of this space to a permanent plaza, with at least two thirds of the respondents valuing landscaping, permanent lighting, and public art within the space.

Overall, the focus has consistently been on creating a flexible space that is safe, inviting, and welcoming to all as the city continues to grow and densify.

Design and Programming

Based on extensive stakeholder engagement and design objectives set in 2016, the design includes:

- A continuous level surface of concrete and pavers offering a consistent treatment throughout the Robson Square precinct, improved drainage conditions, and landscaping.
- Pedestrian improvements at the intersections with Hornby Street and Howe Street, plus civil works along Hornby to further delineate the bike and vehicle lanes.

- Infrastructure to support year round use and programming, events, public art and vending including moveable and permanent seating, lighting, and wayfinding, and access to site services (electrical and water). Currently, water and electrical access are limited, and the improvements will offer a more sustainable alternative to the use of generators.

The design is intentionally flexible allowing for a variety of experiences to be created throughout the year. For example, seasonal weather protection can be introduced for winter events.

A stewardship advisory group has been developed to provide input into the ongoing operations and programming of the public spaces at Block 51 and 800 Robson to ensure the site is well cared for, supports shared objectives, and is welcoming to all. The group includes area stakeholders: the Downtown Vancouver Business Improvement Association, UBC Robson Square, Vancouver Art Gallery and the Province of BC.

Plaza Delivery

Land ownership and legal agreements between the Province and the City are complex and integrated across the precinct. The Province owns Block 51, where the Art Gallery is situated and the City holds a long-term lease; the City owns the 800 Robson street-right-of-way however the Province holds encroachments and sub-surface leases related to the surrounding facilities. The Province and the City have a long history of working together and partnering on improvements in the precinct. While 800 Robson is a City-led project, it was determined the Province is best positioned to deliver the construction of the project. A development management agreement between the City and the Province detailing the terms for delivery of the plaza space has been agreed on with the Province and is ready for execution, subject to City funding confirmation.

Strategic Analysis

Temporary Plaza Conditions:

Since 800 Robson Street was closed to vehicle access, minor site changes have been completed allowing the space to function for pedestrians and events while staff continued to engage key stakeholders on the long-term, permanent design and stewardship. These works included levelling the street and temporary planters at the block ends (Hornby St and Howe St). The current condition does not provide basic services needed to support the public use and activation envisioned, as defined through the years of public engagement (e.g. lighting, electrical).

Recent Stakeholder Feedback:

Since December 2018, staff have heard concerns from key stakeholders about the project delay and a strong interest in seeing this public plaza move forward in 2019. Feedback in support of the project has been received from a number of organizations including Vancouver Art Gallery, UBC Robson Square, Downtown Vancouver Business Improvement Association, and Vancouver Public Space Network and others which have been engaged throughout the multi-year consultation process. Appendix A includes letters received.

Funding Alternatives:

Following the December 2018 Council direction, staff have pursued various options for partnership with regional and senior level governments. Staff have worked with TransLink to secure approval in principle for the reallocation of 2019 allocated funds for active transportation totaling \$1.13M for this project.

Additionally, a project application to the Federal Canada Cultural Spaces Fund Program is underway. This funding program is competitive and ongoing, and the application response timeline is unknown. The federal program offers up to 50% cost-share on the City's portion. Staff will also pursue any additional funding opportunities as they arise.

Building on our partnership with the Province, there are no immediate provincial funding opportunities identified applicable to this key public space initiative; staff will continue to pursue.

In order to proceed with the needed procurement process and maximize the construction window in 2019, staff recommend proceeding with a funding allocation of \$5.38M to enable delivery of the 800 Robson Plaza; comprised of \$1.13M of TransLink funding and up to \$4.25M of Transportation DCL's. Should senior government funding requests be successful, the City's portion of the funding total will be lowered.

The use of Transportation DCLs will ensure that the project is not competing with future CAC funding that could be directed to housing initiatives.

The \$1.13M in City active transportation projects that were previously planned to receive the TransLink funding will be recommended to be funded by a corresponding amount in Transportation DCLs through quarterly adjustments.

Private sector partnerships are also being explored with a focus on programming the space and involvement in events and sponsorship.

Financial

The funding source for the recommended 800 Robson Plaza Upgrade multi-year capital project budget will be \$4.25 million DCL from the 2019-2022 Capital Plan (Transportation–Street Use Services) and a reallocation of \$1.13 million Translink funding from the Active Transportation Corridors and Spot Improvements program.

Environmental

This work supports key strategic plans and the three pillars of sustainability (social, environmental and economic) through:

- Creating public spaces that strengthen public life and cultural experiences;
- Encouraging active modes of transportation;
- Providing opportunities for greater social connection;
- Exploring green infrastructure opportunities; and
- Supporting economic opportunities and local businesses.

CONCLUSION

Public and stakeholders have long been engaged in a process to create a permanent plaza at this location with expectations for project delivery in 2019. The City has a longstanding partnership with Province in the Robson Square precinct which has been the basis for an agreement on a partnership to deliver the Plaza. Securing the funding for the permanent plaza at 800 Robson Street will allow the City to continue forward with the partnership with the Province of BC on the delivery of this critical public gathering space. The reallocation of TransLink funding furthers the intergovernmental partnerships needed for the success of civic spaces such as 800 Robson Plaza.

* * * * *

18 January 2019



Mayor Kennedy Stewart,
Members of Vancouver City Council
454 West 12th Avenue
Vancouver, BC V5Y 1V4

Re: Robson Square / 800-block Robson

Dear Mayor Stewart and Members of Council,

I am writing on behalf of the Vancouver Public Space Network to express our concern – and an important “ask” – regarding the decision, in late-December 2018, to defer approval of funding for the completion of Robson Square.

We know that you are all strong supporters of public space. You, like us, recognize the critical role that our plazas, parks and other spaces play to residents and visitors: the part they play in supporting health and well-being, the opportunities they provide for social sustainability and cultural expression, the positive impact they make on the local economy, and the way that they provide a forum for local democracy. Given your recent, and important move to advance the city’s response to climate change, I would also note that public spaces play an ever-increasing role as an amenity that compliments the sort of higher density, low-carbon living conditions that are necessary to our future growth as a city.

Over the past few years, the City has taken many important steps to advance the planning, design, and activation of public spaces in Vancouver. This has helped to invigorate public life, particularly in the downtown. But there is critical work that needs to be finished. Of these, the completion of Robson Square is chief amongst them.

It is for this reason, that we were saddened to see that, after almost a decade of work (and with the Robson Square project currently sitting in an interim design state), that the funding necessary to deliver on the approved “permanent” design was deferred.

Robson Square, and the 800-block segment that ties blocks 51 and 61 together, represents the public space ‘heart’ of Vancouver. A magnet for residents and visitors, 800-block Robson is the site of an extraordinary range of activities, supported by some

of the highest pedestrian volumes in the city. In addition, the scale, access to sun, and surrounding cultural uses contribute to a space that is far more intimate and than other, larger, and more event-focused spaces such as ʘx"λanəq Xwtl'e7énk Square (formerly Art Gallery North Plaza).

We understand from the Council discussion, that part of your decision was informed by the sense of urgency around affordable housing. It is an urgency that we, and our members (many of whom are students and/or lower income) share. There is, however, an important need to *also* press ahead with critical public space projects. We feel strongly that these two items should not be seen as a matter of "either/or." As the city grows, densifies and changes, the role of public spaces like Robson will be even more acute. A place like Robson Square acts as the city's living room – especially for many of those dealing with the very affordability issues that you are rightly concerned about.

We have been following and engaged in discussions around the proposed plaza for many years now. Since roughly the time of the Olympics, there has been steady movement from temporary activations, to an approved year-round closure, to the creation of a draft design concept and earlier (but un-utilized capital funding allocations). Along the way, Councillors from all elected parties have noted their support for the initiative.

We would therefore request that you direct staff, through the City Manager and the General Managers of Engineering and Planning, to resolve this funding question as early as possible in 2019, and expedite the project as part of their work planning. It's important that the City maintain the great momentum that has been built up on this important project. Robson Square needs to have its 800-block design made permanent. Please, let's take this exciting plaza expansion and enhancement off the drawing board and onto the ground.

Yours truly,



Paola Qualizza
Chair
Vancouver Public Space Network

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January 17, 2019

Mayor and Council
City of Vancouver
453 West 12th Ave
Vancouver, BC
V5Y 1V4

I am writing on behalf of the DV BIA in response to the Council amendment to defer the approval of funding in the Capital Budget for improvements to Robson Plaza on December 18th, 2018 at the regular Council meeting.

It is our opinion that there should be no delay in construction plans for the permanent plaza, and that the funding should remain in place for this project.

Robson Plaza as part of Block 51 is one of the few large public spaces available downtown. It is regularly a host to marquee events like TD Vancouver International Jazz Festival and Amazon's Vancouver Christmas Tree lighting amongst many others. It has major significance as a gathering space and was identified by City Council as a place to pilot closure and programming from 2011-2015. Intensive seasonal placemaking and many rounds of stakeholder and public consultation helped contribute to a vision for the plaza. Based on the pilot's success, Council made a decision in April 2016 to close the space to traffic and design a permanent plaza. It was a long time coming.

The DV BIA has been a strategic partner with the City since the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in efforts to build successful public spaces. We have allocated significant resources to support City initiatives such as VIVA Vancouver, Robson Redux, and the stewardship of Block 51 in addition to our own placemaking initiatives such as our More Awesome Now alleyways, and The Perch POPS (privately-owned public spaces). These most recent programs were inspired by our organization's strategic plan emphasizing an enhanced experience for locals and visitors in the public realm and with consideration of the City's Transportation Plan 2040, Greenest City 2020 Plan, and West End Community Plan which all emphasize prioritization of pedestrians and the importance of vibrant and safe public spaces to foster social interaction.

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Rosewood Hotel Georgia

Chris Stokes
QuadReal Property Group

PRESIDENT AND CEO:

Charles Gauthier
Downtown Vancouver BIA

Plazas are those 'Third Places' that provide opportunities to interact, connect, and sojourn in an accessible and inclusive space. In an increasingly dense urban environment that often has its citizens living in small quarters, the public realm becomes the alternative living room for those that do not otherwise have a welcoming common space to provide respite. Space is an amenity and access to space is vital to a livable city. We have collected data over the last few years in our public spaces that show extremely positive visitor experiences and how lively public spaces contribute to personal well-being. Details are available in our [Perch measurement report](#).

Unfortunately, construction has been delayed since design approval by Council in December 2016 which has slowed momentum enough for this Council to consider the project a less immediate priority. In its current make-shift state, the space's practical functionality doesn't lend to smooth event hosting or operational up-keep and the optics are poor. Deferring the construction of Robson's permanent plaza would only emphasize the temporariness of this place for people and all of the momentum generated and resources spent on the path to a permanent plaza would be lost. This recent decision does not align with initiatives that the City is currently working on including Places for People and Plaza Stewardship strategies or acknowledge the value of findings from this work and previous placemaking endeavours.

In consideration to the points above, the DVBA kindly requests that the construction phase for the permanent Robson Plaza design go ahead without delay as originally budgeted.

Sincerely,



Charles Gauthier, MCP
President & CEO
DOWNTOWN VANCOUVER BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION