THE CITY OF ASHEVILLE

STAFF REPORT

Council Meeting Date: September 26, 2023

Subject: Pack Square Plaza Vision Plan

Staff Resource(s): Steph Monson Dahl, Planning and Urban Design Director

Action Requested: Adoption of Reimagining Pack Square Plaza: A Vision Plan

Background:

- This initiative has its roots in the work of the Joint City-County Vance Monument Task Force, and the resulting March 2021 City Council resolution to remove the Vance Monument.
- Asheville City Council and the Buncombe County Commissioners contributed funding for a planning process to develop a vision for the future of the site.
- On 6/14/2022 City Council authorized a contract with McAdams Company to lead the engagement process and assemble the Vision Plan.
- The project kicked off in late summer 2023, included significant public engagement, and is now complete.
- In June of 2023, the City was awarded a $3,000,000 grant from the Mellon Foundation's Monuments Project to perform the following activities identified through the Pack Square Plaza Vision planning process: 1) design and engineering that advances the vision for a more inclusive Pack Square; 2) community organizing, community design, and construction that promotes the unique narrative of The Block; and 3) county-wide programming and education efforts that deepen storytelling and oral and video history efforts in our community.
- Buncombe County staff will continue to partner on the grant- funded initiative by contributing staff time.

Plan Summary:

- Overall, The Vision states that Pack Square Plaza in the future should: be more usable and accessible; provide new experiences and amenities; be a place for sharing stories and addressing past harm; and better connect to The Block.
- The Plan recommends: how to reuse the site of the former Vance Monument; how to use design and programming to make Pack Square Plaza more welcoming and inclusive in the future; how to consider public-private partnerships in the future; how to connect The Block and Pack Square Plaza; and the potential cost and phasing of projects suggested.
- The Plan organizes community input into ten themes that can guide any future improvement projects: Equitable and Welcoming Places/Spaces; People Centered; Elevated, Supported, and Connected; Safe Environment; Authentic + Elevates Local Pride; Re-envisioning the Vance Monument; Healing and Addressing Past Harm; Telling the Stories; Prioritizing Pedestrians; and Maintenance and Operations.
- The Plan provides ten design-based ideas for moving the community themes for improvement forward.
- These ideas range from projects that can be easily implemented in the short term to items that would take significant additional planning and consideration over many years.
- They are:
    - Improve or create new spaces in the plaza for civic engagement and expression, storytelling, oral history, public art and a central gathering space;
    - Move the crosswalk near Patton Avenue and Broadway Street to improve pedestrian access to Pack Square Plaza;

    - Remove the base of the Vance Monument, subject to a ruling by the North Carolina Supreme Court; Redesign and activate the ground floor of the Biltmore Building which serves as the northern edge of the Plaza;
    - Reposition the elevated lawn on the eastern edge of the Plaza to create a meditation grove/space for healing and reflection; Close North Pack Square to vehicular traffic to increase the accessible space of the plaza for pedestrians;
    - Convert College Street from one-way to two-way traffic;
    - Redesign S. Market Street as an active cultural corridor to improve connections to The Block; Improve wayfinding to The Block from Biltmore Avenue; and
    - Reimagine the long-term use of the Municipal Building.

- The final Vision Plan contains edits to the originally released draft plan.
- The changes derive from public input received and include corrections to maps, elimination of redundant information, and minor text changes for clarity.

Plan Alignment and Consistency:

- The Plan is consistent and aligns with all themes from Living Asheville, the City's Comprehensive Plan:
    - Livable Built Environment- The plan recommends continued investments in our public realm to provide more sustainable places for living, working and recreating.
    - Resilient Economy- The plan recommends commercial activation of underused public space that can support increased economic health, foster business growth, and reliance on local assets.
    - Healthy Community- The plan recognizes that the public provision of parks and public space provides an important framework for public health.
    - Interwoven Equity- The plan recommends improvements that repair inaccessible or unwelcoming spaces and considers all groups in our community.
    - Harmony with the Natural Environment- The plan recommends the creation of a mediation grove where people's mental health is supported through a direct connection with our natural resources.
    - Responsible Regionalism- The plan was developed using a regional context for design, programming, and maintenance needs and will be implemented under a partnership with Buncombe County.

- The Plan aligns with and supports five of the seven Downtown Master Plan themes:
    - Sustain Downtown's dynamic culture and economy
    - Enhance Downtown's role as a center of community
    - Preserve and Enhance Diverse Architecture, historic resources, public realm and view corridors that create downtown's unique legacy
    - Provide good, interconnected transportation choices for better access and for better health
    - Make downtown a national model of sustainable development and operations at every level.

Council Goal(s):

- An Equitable and Diverse Community
- A Well Planned and Livable Community

Committee(s):

- Planning and Economic Development Committee of City Council: 8/14/2023 voted 2-0 to recommend City Council hear presentation of plan on 9/12/2023 and consider adoption of plan on 9/26/2023
- Downtown Commission: 8/26/2023 Voted 9-0 to recommend Council adopt the plan
- Planning and Zoning Commission: 9/14/2023 - voted 7-0 to move to City Council
- City Council heard a presentation on this on 9/12/23

Pro(s):

- Provides recommendations for future investments
- Adoption of the plan will strengthen the ability to receive grant or partner funding in the future.

Con(s):
- None

Fiscal Impact:
- While Council adoption of this plan requires no additional City resources, implementing the recommendations requires significant capital and operating investments over time.
- Staff will work to assess City funding capacity and identify other funding opportunities (beyond the existing Mellon Foundation grant) to implement the plan as part of annual budget development processes.

Suggested Motion:
- Move to adopt Reimagining Pack Square: A Vision Plan and find that the request is reasonable, is in the public interest, is consistent with the city's comprehensive plan and other adopted plans, and meets the needs of the community in that the plan: 1) builds on the existing assets and history of the study area in context of the pending legal decision regarding the site of the former Vance Monument 2) creates a vision that values diversity, equity and inclusion and considers how the future of the area can support our growing county; 3) provides a framework for future capital improvements and improvements to programming; and, 4) outlines both short term and long term considerations for the area.

Attachment(s)
Reimagining Pack Square: A Vision Plan
Planning and Zoning Commission Recommendation

RESOLUTION NO. 23-_____

RESOLUTION ADOPTING REIMAGINING PACK SQUARE PLAZA: A VISION PLAN

WHEREAS, Asheville City Council and Buncombe County Commissioners dedicated funding for a planning process to determine the future of the area around the former site of the Vance Monument in 2021, and;

WHEREAS, the NC General Statutes empower cities to create plans in Sec 160D-501; and

WHEREAS, the plan, titled “Reimaging Pack Square: A Vision Plan: was developed with significant public input and engagement over the course of one year; and

WHEREAS, the Asheville Planning and Zoning Commission held a public hearing on September 14, 2023 and voted unanimously to recommend adoption of the Plan based upon the oral and written comments presented before and at the hearing, as well as the Plan’s compliance with the Living Asheville Comprehensive Plan (“Living Asheville”) and other adopted city plans; and

WHEREAS, the Plan aligns with the 2036 Council Vision in the area of “A Well Planned and Livable Community”, and “An Equitable and Diverse Community” and its adoption will help guide future capital improvements and programming for the area, and support future efforts to seek grant or partner funding to implement the plan;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF ASHEVILLE THAT:

Reimagining Pack Square Plaza: A Vision Plan is hereby adopted.

Read, approved and adopted this 26th day of September, 2023.

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City Clerk Mayor

Approved as to form:

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City Attorney