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ALERT

LeClaire re-imagines new uses for city plaza

Jennifer DeWitt Nov 30, 2019 Updated Dec 2, 2019

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LeClaire is considering a makeover for its City Centre Plaza area that would create a greenspace for library programming and community events.

Jennifer DeWitt

A new chapter could be in store for the plaza area between LeClaire City Hall and the city's library and — like the library — it has a little something for everyone.

After nearly 10 months of re-imagining how to makeover the City Centre Plaza, the steering committee has a professional design concept in hand that incorporates many of the ideas and wish lists of the LeClaire Community Library staff and board, Friends of the Library, city leaders and residents.

Designed by Quad-City landscape architect Todd Wiebenga, the concept calls for removing the concrete and sloping plaza and replacing it with a flat greenspace. Inside the greenspace would be nature play areas, trees and plantings, a pergola, art sculpture, a contained playspace as well as tables, seating and 24/7 wi-fi access. Other design amenities include in-ground slides, a boulder rock climbing feature and new pedestrian ramps, all of which make use of the sloping terrain.

"Essentially, the plan requires moving a lot of dirt," said Library Director Ellen Miller, who led the planning. "Imagine walking out the library door and instead of meeting steps outside it would be a beautiful greenspace that's walled in and creates privacy for library programming."

The greenspace, which would be level with the library's front door, would provide an area for the library to offer outdoor programming such as its yoga classes and new programs such as parachute play, a storytelling picnic program, outdoor crafts and live-animal shows. It also could be the site for community concerts and live music entertainment or even a portable ice rink.

Miller said there were many requests for a splash pad, but that idea now is an amenity that could become part of LeClaire's riverfront, where plans are underway for a new Marina District. She still hopes for some type of interactive activity with water play.

Miller also envisions having other toy items that patrons can check out and take outside such as sleds, balls, hula hoops, ropes and games.

Estimating the costs

City leaders stressed that the project is only in the concept stage. No final design has been completed nor has any funding been committed from the city or The Friends, which likely will provide some funding. The Friends, the library's fundraising arm, already covered the costs of hiring Wiebenga, owner of Aunt Rhodie's Landscaping & Design Studio in Eldridge.

The LeClaire City Council voted Nov. 18 to hire Townsend Engineering in Davenport to now develop an engineering cost plan based on the conceptual plan to determine a construction estimate.

LeClaire City Administrator Ed Choate said Townsend's plan still would not be the final design but "it gets us to 'Here are the plans, costs and (helps the city decide) do you want to go forward with it?'"

He said that the plaza makeover is expected to be part of the city's upcoming budget talks and its future capital improvement planning.

Miller said depending on the estimate "we might have to step back if it's astronomical." But she said the committee worked to select something "between ambitious and spectacular." "The whole team wanted to think big about it."

Planning new uses

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Miller said prior to her arrival in 2016, a strategic plan by The Mercer Group identified the under-utilized plaza as one of LeClaire weaknesses. "It was a missed opportunity," she said.

Melita Tunncliff, the library's circulation manager, and Miller already see young families use the area for free play and regularly have patrons sitting outside to access the library's wi-fi. But the library and city see the potential for reinventing the space.

The planning process began with a steering committee made up of a cross-section of patrons, board members, business leaders and others. The group also hosted public focus groups last winter.

Tunncliff said the process got those involved "thinking what we want the usage to be."

Both women think the space could become an extension of the library given the right mix of new amenities.

"Ed (Choate) was the one to get us to think big," Miller said. In fact, she said he was the one to suggest the new space also could encompass some of city hall's current parking spaces.

Project inspiration

Wiebenga, the landscape architect, said the planning began by thinking "What if? What if we could do whatever we wanted with this space."

Within his concept, he said, "The greatest detail is to lower the grade making a majority of the space at the level of the library with a large green open space." That space could be used for library programs, a play area, outdoor concerts or even a removable ice rink.

"I can envision a Friday night concert on the green," with food trucks and local eateries serving the area from the streets.

Wiebenga said part of the plan's inspiration came from Rockefeller Center in New York City, where the area is a recessed space that sits below the street around it. The LeClaire plan also calls for viewing areas from atop the plaza near the City Hall side and on Wisconsin Street. The ground above would be surrounded by railings.

In addition, Tunnick brought back ideas such as nature play and other children's activities that she saw at Maggie Daley Park in downtown Chicago. She envisions the new plaza's ramps as creating a new, improved front door to both the library and City Hall.

"It could be a great asset to the city of LeClaire rather than just an area between two buildings," Wiebenga said.

If the project materializes, Miller said, "This could extend and enhance the library as a leisure destination and community space for families. Instead of being here for one hour it could be a two-hour destination if we had all these amenities."

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