



## Design Commission Briefing

### SUMMARY MEMO

**Date:** May 13, 2025  
**To:** Portland Design Commission  
**From:** Benjamin Nielsen, Design & Historic Review Team  
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**Re:** Briefing – North Park Blocks Extension  
Design Commission Hearing March 20, 2025

This summary memo is regarding the March 20, 2025 North Park Blocks Extension. All documents may be found here: [Efiles - BRIEFING – North Park Blocks Extension](#) and includes presentation slides, Staff Memo and Zoom Webinar recording.

**Commissioners in attendance on March 20, 2025:** Brian McCarter, Chair, Chandra Robinson, Vice Chair, Zari Santner, Tina Bue, Sarah Vaz. *Absent: Thomas Eldridge and Joe Swank (written testimony)*

Portland Parks & Recreation staff have been working with PLACE Studio since 2023 to develop a design plan for the North Park Blocks extension, as envisioned in the 2019/20 USPS (Broadway Corridor) Central City Master Plan. Although Open Space uses are exempt from Design Review per PZC 33.420.045.A.7, the North Park Blocks extension project represents the culmination of many years of dreaming and planning, and the development of the North Park Blocks extension will likely serve to catalyze new development at the former USPS campus.

#### Design Commission Advice

##### **General Summary**

- One Commissioner specifically noted “It is impossible to not get excited about this park. It harkens to the High Line or Little Island in New York City.” And other Commissioner noted “One of the most exciting things we’ve seen downtown in many years.”
- Commissioners all agreed that Option B was the strongest design of the three. This option aligns well with the open space sequencing and general programming as envisioned in the USPS Central City Master Plan.
  - Option A is too formal and Option C maybe missing some of the organic elements. B is more approachable.
- Commissioners were delighted to see the new design, and especially the structure that carries the Green Loop through the park.

- Commissioners noted that the increased number of trees, especially in consideration of future users on these larger open spaces, and towards a warmer future climate.
- The project is moving in the right direction, knowing that details still need to be worked out, especially the scope and scale of public art.
- Commissioners are excited to see this project again when it returns to discuss the Green Loop Design Guidelines.

### **Commissioner Comments**

- Commissioners were delighted to see that the ramp structure is a focal point of the block and support the concept of breaking pathways.
  - One Commissioner noted the structure is like a nod to Tanner Springs.
  - Additional design development of the pathways with potted plants and/ or trees would further a parklike quality into the ramps.
- Commissioners support more trees in the Plaza, while still supporting areas for festivals and markets. Finding the balance to create more shade areas as well as spacing for actively used and healthy lawn areas will be critical for this park.
- Commissioners also agreed that a central fountain, even stream-like and not-necessarily interactive, would be an effective people attractor and sound dampening asset for this potentially noisy area of the City.
  - One Commissioner specifically noted that active water fountains under the canopies on the plaza would be fabulous.
- Commissioners appreciated the curb less design around the park and how it extends into the park.
  - One Commissioner noted on Option B, the preferred option, that the east edge of plan feels a little less developed than west edge and that consideration of a more organic expression of the hardscape pattern could better engage the park greenspaces.
- One Commissioner also commended the Team on this ambitious design; it is needed, and it is beautiful. The design recalls Yerba Buena Park and Plaza in San Francisco.
  - Particularly exciting is the opportunity to have elevated viewpoints – a lovely thing to have in Portland as we just do not have a lot of these types of public spaces.
- Commissioners agreed that public art, particularly large-scale public art, has an important role to play in this park.
  - Lee Kelly artwork is big and steel and so is the ramp, but it would be wonderful to have colorful pieces of art, especially in areas that might be hard to manage or have social problems. Use art as opportunity to achieve multiple goals if you can.
  - It would be great to collaborate with PNCA in choosing and siting public art in the park as anchor points.
- One Commissioner noted the “soft geometry” of the ramp structure being attractive, but please avoid filling the space below with boulders, plantings would be much better.
  - Please include seating with backs as needed; seating without backs can be exhausting.
  - Please be sure lily pad benches have space for people in mobility devices.

- Commissioners agreed the design stacks up very well against guidelines; meeting or exceeding many guidelines.
- One Commission noted that the Silva Cell System — Modular suspended pavement system — would be effective in the support large trees.
- Commissioners noted a concern to be aware, like the upper end of O'Bryant Plaza, some social challenges can occur due to lack of connection to adjacent streets. Having multiple connections to access the elevated ramps
  - Commissioners agreed that there will need to be a commitment to ensure that programming of these spaces is rigorous enough to ensure that this park is used in the way we want it to be used.
  - Be sure to think about how we have eyes on this space and activities to program it.