



## NEBRASKA CAPITOL ENVIRONS COMMISSION STAFF REPORT

APPLICATION NUMBER Urban Design Record #24101  
APPLICATION TYPE Certificate of Appropriateness  
ADDRESS/LOCATION Downtown Corridors Streetscape Project  
HEARING DATE July 26, 2024  
ADDITIONAL MEETINGS -  
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### RECOMMENDATION: APPROVAL

#### Summary of Request

Downtown Corridors is a city-led streetscape enhancement effort meant to improve the attractiveness, safety, connectivity, and overall vibrancy of some of downtown's most important street corridors – O Street, 9th, 10th, 11th and 14th. Since January of 2022, city staff have been working with a design consultant to develop and implement a master plan for these improvements. Design for the first phase of improvements is nearing completion, and thus, the project team is seeking feedback and approval of the proposal before proceeding with construction documentation.

While the project team will be providing an overview of the entire project, the focus of NCEC's review at this time is the segment of O Street from 14<sup>th</sup> to Centennial Mall. Commissioners can view plans for the larger project here: <https://www.downtowncorridorslincoln.com/public-meetings>.

#### Compatibility with the Design Standards

The portion of this project intersecting the Capitol Environs District should consider both the general and Centennial Mall specific standards for landscapes. Those standards have been copied below in their full context.

#### Design Standard 18: General Landscape of All Malls

The landscape of the Capitol Malls should enhance the Capitol setting and vistas:

- by providing canopy and definition at the mall edge, but leaving the centers of the malls more open, allowing on-axis views of the Capitol,
- by creating a sense of organization and unity through form, color, texture, and spacing that may be lacking in the adjacent architecture,
- by establishing a rhythm of visual and physical movement leading ultimately to the Capitol,
- by providing seasonal change and interest.

There is a delicate balance between a landscape that enhances and one that overwhelms—color and form changes should be in large sweeps and masses to avoid creating small, distracting focal points. The landscape should be bolder and more colorful closest to the Capitol.

Facing Capitol Square and the Malls, front yards shall not contain mechanical equipment, above-ground utilities, docks, or unscreened ramps. Architectural or planted screenings may be offered, with maintenance requirements.

Active use of the Malls should be encouraged by the selection and placement of landscape elements such as seating.

#### **Guideline 18.1:**

To focus attention on the Capitol, phase out trees from center medians and replace them with simple, uniform plantings of low shrubs, grasses, or perennials in large masses. Use of perennials is preferred to annual plantings, but annuals will be considered when their maintenance can be assured. Conversion from turf should be tied directly to maintenance capability and assurances.

#### **Guideline 18.2:**

Provide seating in as many locations as appropriate. Benches should:

- be of high quality, refined materials,
- have backs,
- be readily available commercially or easily repaired in-house,
- be of neutral colors,
- be placed along edges to take advantage of shade and allow pedestrians to be close to circulation but not in it.

To provide seating opportunities for conversation, combine benches, trash cans, ash urns and small tables of similar construction and installation.

#### **Guideline 18.3:**

Encourage the use of wide, seating-height caps on retaining walls or edge definers, including pools and fountains.

#### **Guideline 18.4:**

Along blocks of Malls closed to vehicular traffic, allow subtle, small openings through the edge fence or planting from adjacent properties onto Malls to encourage their use.

#### **Guideline 18.5:**

Use high quality pavement that is durable, neutral or natural color, able to be matched or replaced locally or regionally; nonslip but not too rough for high heels; textured or patterned subtly. Asphalt or asphalt pavers are not acceptable. Design paved areas to allow replacement or repair to occur in sections that maintain the established pavement pattern.

#### **Guideline 18.6:**

Retaining walls, seating walls, planters, and other vertical landscape features should be constructed of durable materials, preferably masonry; neutral or natural colors; horizontal lines; no exposed form lines or form-tie holes.

#### **Guideline 18.7:**

Water features can greatly enhance a pedestrian environment but are also expensive and difficult to maintain. In the District, such features should be restricted to Centennial Mall and the first block or two of J Street/East (16<sup>th</sup> St. to 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> Sts.).

**Guideline 18.8:**

Water features should have sculptural quality to their overall design and works, for an attractive appearance whether or not they are operating, or are seasonally out of use. Alternately, water features may be developed as plazas with concealed spouts and drains, to be accessible as pedestrian space when out of use.

**Guideline 18.9:**

Water features in the District should be designed with sound, rather than spray or large vertical movement of water, as the main quality. Fountains should not interfere with vistas to the Capitol.

**Guideline 18.10:**

Color and interest in the center of the malls should be confined to large masses of perennials and grasses 24" or less in height.

**Guideline 18.11:**

Use high quality, permanent landscape materials for edging, containing, and paving in neutral or natural colors. Use of masonry or stone is appropriate where edging or containment is needed. Exercise caution in designing any above-ground planters or planting beds, that they be of sufficient size to support healthy growth of plant materials. Remove undersized planters from existing trees and replace trees as necessary.

**Guideline 18.12:**

Utilities, dumpsters, service areas, and the like should be located as inconspicuously as possible, and screened from Capitol Square and the Malls with permanent materials which are compatible with the adjacent buildings.

**Design Standard 19: Overstory Trees**

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Overstory trees establish the visual and physical definition of space along the edges of the Malls. On the J Street/East right-of-way east of Capitol Parkway, overstory trees should not be planted as Capitol views along that narrower street are obstructed by the canopy spread of mature overstory trees.

**Guideline 19.1:**

The overstory tree line along the Malls should be on public property, near the property line.

**Guideline 19.2:**

Choose overstory trees of different hardy species with similar growth habits and size to provide visual and physical continuity. Vary the species within each mall according to a specific pattern. Space the trees at regular intervals, but accommodate specific site requirements such as driveways. Overstory trees should be spaced to provide a solid canopy where possible.

**Guideline 19.3:**

Overstory trees used to define the edges of the Malls should be single stem, upright ovals, taller than they are wide. Narrow, columnar overstory trees are discouraged, as are trees with a very broad growth habit. Choose species with good fall color.

#### **Guideline 19.4:**

Restrict underplantings to perennials or shrubs requiring little if any division to minimize future root disturbance.

#### **Design Standard 20: Understory Trees**

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Understory (ornamental) trees should provide seasonal interest and pedestrian scale and are also the appropriate tree-type for J Street/East right-of-way east of Capitol Parkway.

#### **Guideline 20.1:**

Along the interior edges of the Malls, use understory (ornamental) trees where pedestrian scale and seasonal interest (including spring bloom, fall foliage color, and winter fruit and bark interest) is needed. Treat understory trees as a mass rather than as individual specimens, and space them accordingly.

#### **Guideline 20.2:**

On all Malls, recognize the dominance of the edge overstory trees, and choose and locate understory trees to avoid interfering with the growth requirements of the overstory trees.

#### **Design Standard 21: Landscaping Street Frontages**

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The landscape zones between curb and sidewalk ("curb zone"), and between sidewalk and private property, should be used to provide visual continuity, interest, and physical separation between pedestrians and vehicles.

#### **Guideline 21.1:**

Maintain the landscaping of the curb zone in all Mall locations with vehicular traffic, to define the pedestrian area. This zone should contain some vertical element, either tree trunks or low (30" or less) shrubs, perennials, grasses, or groundcovers.

#### **Guideline 21.2:**

The curb zone on each Mall should be treated consistently. Private vegetable gardens, flowers, shrubs, and other diversions should be eliminated.

#### **Guideline 21.3:**

Restrict shrubs to specific zones: at the "build-to" lines defined for each Mall, to reinforce that edge; in the curb zone; or on center medians.

#### **Guideline 21.4:**

Shrub and perennial plantings on the Malls and at their edges should be restricted to 30" or less.

#### **Guideline 21.5:**

Shrubs should be used in large masses, with species variation occurring at obvious breaks in the rhythm of the malls. Two or three species can be used in a single planting area, allowing the combination of deciduous and evergreen material. Choose shrubs for seasonal interest, particularly bloom. Choose shrubs with a natural shape and height that requires little pruning to maintain.

#### **Guideline 21.6:**

Do not shear shrubs in public landscapes. Shearing of shrubs on private property facing the Malls or Capitol Square is also discouraged.

### **Guideline 21.7:**

The primary groundcover on all malls, medians, frontages, and adjacent private property should be turf. Long-range commitment to maintenance may allow conversion of specific turf areas to groundcover shrubs or perennials and grasses for additional interest; however, in the short-term, uniform turf will present the best appearance with the least maintenance. Encourage use of native turf where site conditions allow it.

## **Design Standard 22: Centennial Mall Landscape**

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Centennial Mall is the District's most formal landscaped mall, providing a varied, safe, and attractive pedestrian environment, with opportunities for interaction and enjoyment, within a design framework that offers continuous views of the most prominent facade of the Capitol. The redesign and rebuilding, rededicated as "Nebraska's Centennial Mall" in 2016, establishes:

- strong, well-defined edges;
- continuous, accessible walkways lined with pedestrian-scale lighting;
- open center accented with plazas and water features.

This overall design should be maintained and any proposed changes should be evaluated against whether they enhance this design.

### **Guideline 22.1:**

Continue the use of red oaks as the major species defining the edges of Centennial Mall, while maintaining a plan that allows introduction of other overstory trees on a systematic basis to eliminate monoculture.

### **Guideline 22.2:**

Maintain continuous paths on either side which further define the edges of the Mall, uninterrupted by any stairs, featuring an inner band of plaque opportunities.

### **Guideline 22.3:**

Within the pathways, maintain turf as the predominant treatment.

### **Guideline 22.4:**

A consistent family of street furniture, such as benches, trash receptacles, bollards, planters, tables, and chairs, has been installed in the 2014-16 rebuilding of the Mall. It should be maintained and any new elements should be within this design program.

### **Guideline 22.5:**

Privately-installed furniture adjacent to the Mall should be reviewed by the Commission for overall compatibility, durability, and high quality.

### **Guideline 22.6:**

Monuments, memorials, markers, plaques, and works of public art proposed for Centennial Mall should fit within the overall design concept, enhancing the pedestrian experience while respecting the dominance of views to the Capitol. As it relates to aboveground, three-dimensional monuments, memorials, markers, plaques, and works of public art, Centennial Mall's design should be considered largely complete as of 2021, and the proposal of new pieces to be located within the right-of-way shall generally be discouraged. Proposed pieces to be located outside of the right-of-way on property adjacent to Centennial Mall shall continue to be considered, assuming they fit within the overall context of the Centennial Mall landscape.

Horizontal and vertical surface treatments, such as engraved markers or plaques being inset within pavement or seat wall, shall continue to be allowed and encouraged when appropriate within the design of Centennial Mall.

#### **Guideline 22.7:**

When modified or replaced, traffic signal poles and mast arms should be designed to minimize disruption of views to the Capitol, keeping the signals as close to the edges of the right-of-way as their safety functions permit.

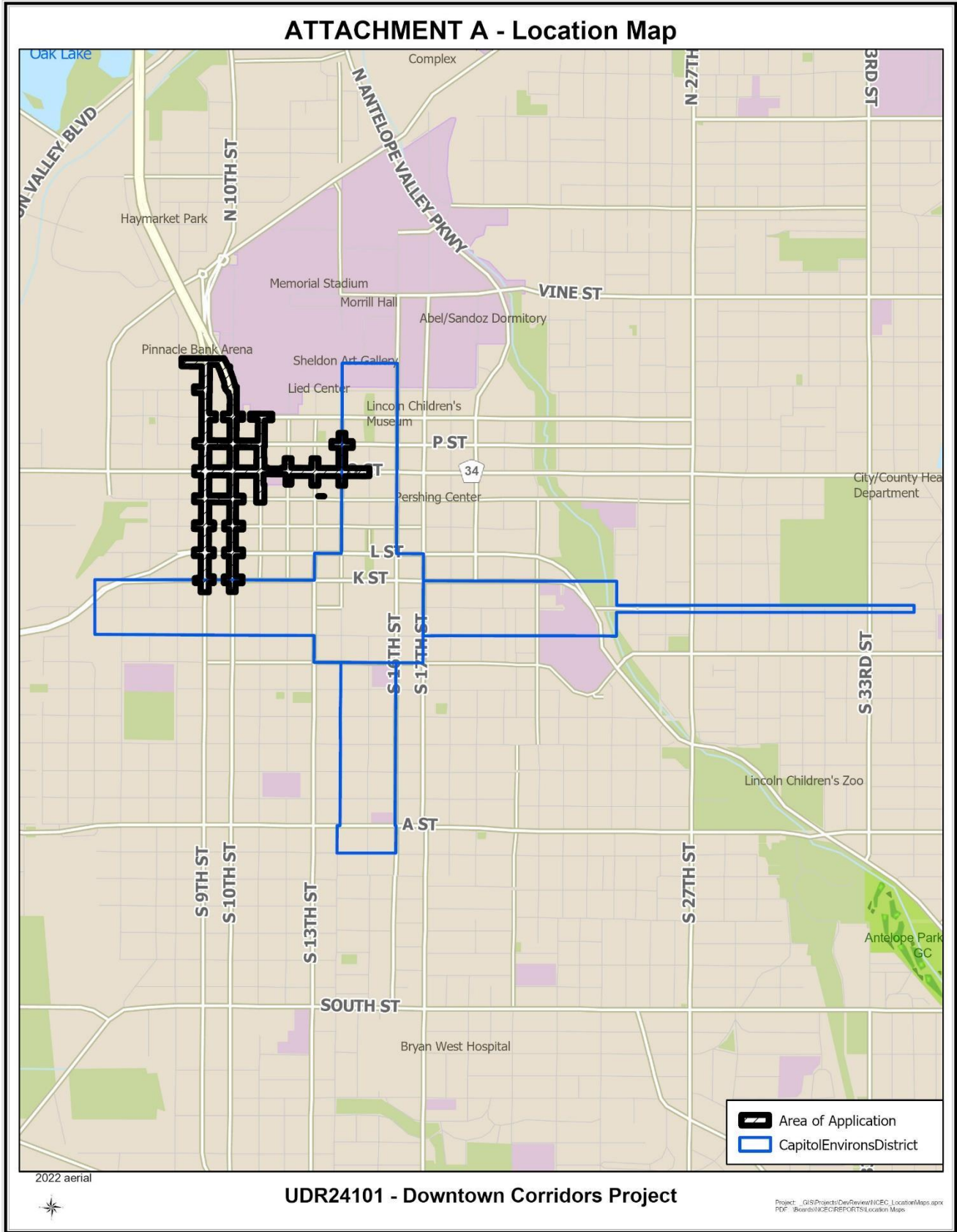
### **Recommendations**

Staff is of the opinion that the proposed Downtown Corridors streetscape improvements project will provide much needed reinvestment in downtown's public realm, including a portion of the Capitol Environs District.

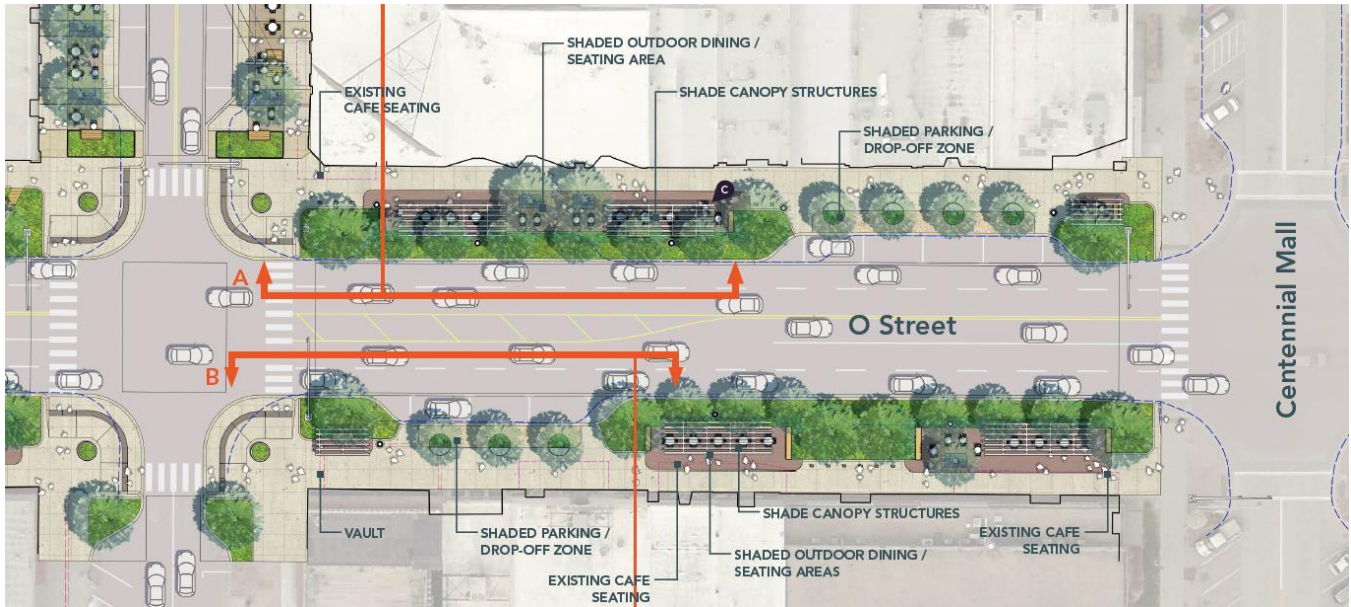
**Recommended finding:** The planned Downtown Corridors streetscape improvements within the Capitol Environs District (O Street between 14<sup>th</sup> and Centennial Mall) generally comply with the Capitol Environs Design Standards.

**Recommended action:** Approval of a Certificate of Appropriateness for the planned Downtown Corridors streetscape improvements within the Capitol Environs District (O Street between 14<sup>th</sup> and Centennial Mall).

# ATTACHMENT A - Location Map



## ATTACHMENT B – Site Plan



*Planned improvements for O Street between 14<sup>th</sup> and Centennial Mall*



## ATTACHMENT C – Renderings



*North side of O Street between 14<sup>th</sup> and Centennial Mall*



*South side of O Street between 14<sup>th</sup> and Centennial Mall*



*View of streetscape along north side of O Street between 14<sup>th</sup> and Centennial Mall*