

## LIBERTY PLAZA

### Background

- Liberty Plaza was constructed in 1977, replacing a gas station and small apartment building. Unknown whether there was an Environmental Assessment done for the site. Demolition included removal of underground gas tanks.
- The plaza was built in conjunction with the building immediately to the west – owned by First Martin - to facilitate access and windows at the basement floor of the building on the east and south sides.
- Several businesses have occupied the storefronts facing the plaza - the Pan Tree, a restaurant on the second floor, and a news stand in the basement were the most beneficial to the plaza. These provided foot traffic and eyes on the park. Both have been replaced by offices with less foot traffic and pedestrian turnover.
- Funding for the original design and construction of the park was partially through HUD and CBDG.
- The plaza has undergone several renovations since its construction, all to deal with issues surrounding the type of use. The renovations have never really changed the structure of the plaza, but only replaced paving materials, benches, tables and lighting.
- Discussions about this plaza and its issues have taken place several times over the life of the park (1991, 1998, and 2003).
- There have been ongoing efforts to increase programming and to have greater police presence.

### Issues

- Perceived as unsafe place.
- Residents tend to be concerned about safety and security.
- Downtown workers and plaza users tend to be more concerned about activating the space and creating an oasis in the downtown - these goals can at times be at odds with the desires of the residents.
- Is not surrounded by retail or restaurants to activate the plaza.
- Access to library lot is not visible and pedestrian access crosses private land.
- Plaza accommodates building to west, which creates a sunken area with dead space on every side of the building.
- Kempf House is a passive use and cut off from plaza by a wall and fence.
- A significant amount of money (over \$200,000) was invested into the plaza structure, paving and furniture as recently as 2003. Parks contributed \$50,000 and the DDA covered the balance. The improvements are still in good shape.
- There is currently approximately \$100,000 in the developer contribution fund that is either specifically designated for Liberty Plaza or could be used for it (designated simply for downtown parks). This would likely be sufficient for design. Demolition and construction would require additional funding sources.

- Each year approximately \$200,000 of Parks Millage revenue is allocated to neighborhood park improvements and Liberty Plaza could be considered for a portion, or all of that funding in a future fiscal year.
- The current PROS plan does not identify Liberty Plaza as an area of focus.

#### Ideas

- Create highly visible pedestrian way to the Library lot from corner of Division and Liberty that feels safe.
- Integration with Kempf house while remaining cognizant of the unique nature of the Kempf site.
- Change structure of plaza to create active use such as a dog park, play ground, or fountain.
- Work with First Martin to create better connection through their property – request public access easement or acquisition of portion of unused space.

#### Process - Background before any potential Public Meetings

- Research whether there are development restrictions tied to the original CBDG/HUD funding and whether an EA was ever done for the removal of the gas station.
- Coordinate with Connecting William Street public process and the Library Lot project to make sure that any proposed concepts for Liberty Plaza are aligned with the larger vision for downtown open space and pedestrian connections. Wait to hold public meetings until some of these proposals have been publically vetted.
- The Park Advisory Commission is considering forming a work group to look at downtown parks and to discuss how efforts in the downtown should be prioritized.
- Meet with Kempf House board to solicit feedback about creating a closer relationship between the Kempf House and Liberty Plaza.
- Bring the topic of Liberty Plaza to PAC for their recommendation on whether to move ahead with a renovation/rebuild, etcetera. This should likely be done when there is greater clarity on the Connecting William Street recommendations as the DDA attended a LAC meeting for feedback on the topic and Liberty Plaza was discussed given its proximity to the 5 public areas Council has charged the DDA with exploring uses for.

#### Future Steps - Public Meetings

- Hold an initial public meeting, possibly two, to simply gather ideas – what is working, what is not, is there a desire for a wholesale change, are there ideas for redevelopment.
- Hold a second public meeting where several concepts incorporating feedback from the first set of public meetings are shared and receive feedback.
- Hold a third public meeting to present a final concept plan.
- Hire consultant to develop detailed engineering plans of the agreed upon final concept.
- This is the process that was used when West Park was re-imagined and worked well.