



Design Review Board (DRB) Staff Report
Prepared for the December 2, 2020 DRB Meeting

Landscaping & New Construction

Case # 20-99:

Cutbank Bluff
Riverside Drive
Memphis, TN 38103

Applicant:

Memphis River Parks Partnership
22 N Front St Ste 960
Memphis, TN 38103

Owner:

City of Memphis
125 N Main St
Memphis, TN 38103

Background:

The DRB reviews the exterior design of public projects constructed in the CBID, as well as projects that receive incentives from the DMC's affiliate boards. DRB review is required for this project for both reasons: it is a significant improvement to a public park in the CBID, and it has been approved for \$6 million in funding from the Downtown Mobility Authority.

The proposed Cutbank Bluff project is an improvement to the section of the bluff where Vance Park meets the Riverwalk. The goal of the project is to enhance the pedestrian connection between the Mississippi River and the rest of downtown, and to expand the existing public space on the bluff.

Project Description:

The entrance to the Cutbank Bluff will be a reconfigured Vance Park, which will contain new hardscaping, trees, and seating. An existing sculpture ("whirl") will be retained and repositioned to overlook the Cutbank Bluff.

The central feature of the Cutbank Bluff is a gently sloping switchback path that provides an accessible route to the riverfront. However, the design of the bluff will incorporate features providing multiple paths. A linear set of stairs, similar to the existing stairs on the site, will create a more direct path to the river for pedestrians. Large stone blocks along the path (referred to as "stone scrambles") will delineate the path, provide flexible seating, and even serve as stairs between path segments.

Staff Report:

Whenever the DRB reviews the design of a construction project, the project's impact on the pedestrian experience is always a central focus. The reason for this is simple: Downtown is one of the few areas of the city designed primarily around the needs of pedestrians rather than cars. Downtown's pedestrian-centric design is one of its primary sources of appeal as a place to live, work, and visit.

Unfortunately, there are still obstacles that can make accessing parts of Downtown challenging for pedestrians, especially those with mobility challenges. The steep grade of the bluff between Downtown's commercial core and the riverfront is one the biggest of these obstacles. Currently, pedestrian access to the riverfront south of Beale Street is solely provided by a series of three steep stairs, which are simply not accessible for many Downtown residents and visitors.

The proposed Cutbank Bluff will dramatically improve the connection between the riverfront and the rest of Downtown, providing both an accessible path. And rather than being a utilitarian means to travel from point A to point B, every section of the Cutbank Bluff project will be a public space in its own right, providing flexible seating and opportunities to take in views of the river. By improving pedestrian connections and creating quality public space, the project helps to achieve two of the DRB's most important goals for Downtown.

Staff Recommendation: **Staff recommends approval.**