City economic panel offers ideas for new downtown plaza

by Bob Seidenberg
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Andy Vick, executive director of Downtown Evanston, says fix up of plaza could produce a “second space” for events, different from Fountain Square. To his left are Heidi Natura, CEO of Living Habitats, and (farther left) Hannah Cusick, the firm’s Project Manager. Paul Zalmezak, the city’s Economic Development Manager, is at far left. Credit: Bob Seidenberg
A plaza at the intersection of Church Street and Maple Avenue the city is seeking to redesign should have an identity separate from Fountain Square, according to members of the Economic Development Committee and others at the EDC meeting.

Other ideas that came up at Wednesday’s meeting included opportunities for local minority-owned restaurants to operate pop-up grab-and-go businesses on site and bringing in visual artists, performers and musicians to enliven the space.

Committee members were responding to questions from representatives of Living Habitats, the Chicago firm the city has contracted with for just under $100,000 to spruce up the plaza at Church Street and Maple Avenue – perhaps best known until now as providing a convenient cut-through between Davis and Church Streets downtown.

The mostly neglected plaza was listed as one of the top priorities on the Evanston Thrives report adopted by the council in May 2023, recommending improvements for Evanston’s business districts post-COVID.

But it received little attention before last January when council members approved a lease of up to 15 years to move city operations to an office building at 909 Davis St., which stands just off the plaza.
From left, Paul Zalmezak, the city’s Economic Development Manager; Heidi Natura, Living Habitats chief executive; Hannah Cusick, Living Habitats Project Manager; developer Mitch Goltz, co-founder of GW Properties; and Katheryn Boden, the city’s Economic Development Coordinator, meet on site Wednesday to discuss ideas for new downtown Civic Center Plaza improvements. Credit: Bob Seidenberg

Council members kicked in federal American Rescue Plan Act money from $100,000 to $400,000 for the project. City plans for the plaza at the intersection of Maple Avenue and Church Street call for transforming the space into a hub for community gatherings, cultural events and placemaking initiatives.

The firm selected for the job, the city said in its request for proposal for the project, will be responsible for “creating a plan that incorporates outdoor dining furniture, festoon/festival lighting, gateway signage, intersection paint, train viaduct murals and other exciting placemaking initiatives.”
Learning about plaza’s users

Living Habitats team members have been at the site and are “really getting started on how the site is currently being used by pedestrians, cyclists, vehicles,” said Hannah Cusick, Living Habitats project manager. She added that team members were out in the plaza area Wednesday meeting with “commuters, people passing through the site, and we also started to meet with some of the property managers, property owners, surrounding the site to really get them on board early and see what they’re interested in – seeing in this space what enhancements they would like to be included as part of the plaza.”

At Wednesday’s meeting it was the committee’s turn. The Living Habitats team had drawn up six questions designed to generate discussion and feedback.

Katherine Gotsick, executive director of the Main Dempster Mile, the nonprofit organization that promotes businesses in that area, took a shot at the two-part first question: “1) How can the Downtown District better represent minority community members in the civic plaza enhancements and 2) How can we [planners] better connect the business community to the plaza?”

Gotsick suggested a pop-up grab-and-go space highlighting the city’s minority-owned businesses such as Hecky’s or C&W Market and Ice Cream Parlor, which embody the “heart and soul” of the community, she said.

Committee member Lisa Dziekan suggested programming will be key, differentiating from the programming at what’s being called the Downtown Evanston Civic Center and Fountain Square at Davis Street and Sherman Avenue, downtown’s “heart and center,” she said, “especially if the water [fountain] comes back on.”

She also emphasized the importance of connecting the plaza to Northlight Theatre, which is scheduled to move to its new location down the block at 1012-16 Church St. sometime in 2026.

At the new civic plaza, she said, her concern is “that we are not just creating another space that competes with Fountain Square, but in fact acts in a different way.”

Sitting next to her, EDC member Andy Vick, executive director of downtownevanston.org, the nonprofit organization that promotes and markets the core downtown, didn’t see the civic plaza as competition. The organization has been sponsoring concerts at Fountain Square this summer, drawing large crowds to that part of downtown.
“I see it as a second space very different from Fountain Square,” he said. “And so, really, I think as it is built out it gives us another venue where we can program in different ways. So I see it as a plus,” he said.

Committee members agreed on the need for improvements around the Metra station.

Dziekan noted the refuse and “not-so-very pleasant smells” people encounter coming down the stairs after getting off the trains.

“If we improve the plaza,” she said, and “we leave a pretty crappy stairway,” added council member and EDC member Jonathan Nieuwsma (4th Ward), “I’m just wondering if we should think about that a little more broadly,” Dziekan said, finishing the thought.
Participating online in the meeting, Melissa Molitor, chair of the Evanston Arts Council, urged the Living Habitats team to think about how the city will activate spaces at the plaza, with attention to the arts.

“I think of all these static pieces that we’re talking about, like the amazing murals Lea’s talking about [Lea Pinsky, executive director of Art Encounter, a participant in the project] and brings to these public spaces are part of that,” Molitor said. “But how do we bring artists into the spaces – and that’s visual artists, performers, musicians, to activate the space because that what draws people into those spaces, and that’s what brings customers into businesses.”

Council member and EDC member Bobby Burns (5th Ward), participating on line, turned the questions back to the Living Habitats team.

“I guess I’m just wondering, based on your understanding of the area based on what you’re hearing from the community, primarily how do you want to use this space.”

“And I say it like that,” he added, “because I don’t think this group (the EDC) , I don’t feel comfortable with this group kind of determining how this space should be primarily used.

‘Trying to be everything to everyone’

“I think that should be driven by something else – either how the people who are currently using the space … people that we are trying to attract to the space.”

He observed that “I think that in planning and design if you try to make something for everyone … it doesn’t have a core that can really draw people in. It’s not doing anything particularly well. It’s just trying to be everything to everyone.”

Responding, Heidi Natura, Living Habitats chief executive, pointed to Northlight Theatre relocating just down the block from the plaza and other activities downtown such as AMC theaters on the other side of Church Street, which might lead to an “entertainment focus, theater focus.”

“From what we heard today, talking to commuters and people passing through, they don’t really see it as a site or place right now. It’s really a path through a commuter transit heavy place. So we need to give them a reason to want to stay,” she said.

Her team is moving from the analysis and background stage to community engagement in August, hoping to bring recommendations to the EDC committee ready by the end of the month.
The plan will eventually go to the City Council for final approval.