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Here's what's in the works for the \$60 million redesign of City Hall Plaza

By **Milton J. Valencia** Globe Staff, Updated June 4, 2019, 12:01 a.m.



Final designs for the reconfiguration of City Hall Plaza include an open play area and a water-wall-lined promenade that leads to an event space fronting Cambridge Street. (SASAKI ILLUSTRATION)

Mayor Martin J. Walsh's administration released final designs Monday for the reconfiguration of City Hall Plaza, with the goal of significantly transforming the brick expanse into an enlivened space intended to change the way residents view, and use, their city government.

Picture a civic engagement building for community group meetings on the plaza's north side. It would be located alongside an open play area and by a water-wall-lined promenade that leads to an

event space fronting Cambridge Street.

In the winter months, there's a skating rink in the middle of the plaza — and in the summer, a farmer's market. Passersby can stop for a moment under one of the 100 trees set to be planted — a colorful contrast to the current red brick desert.

“We wanted it to be a place that wasn't just a cut-through . . . but a reason to come,” said Patrick Brophy, the city's chief of operations, who oversaw the plans for the \$60 million renovation. He said he envisions yoga classes on the plaza; a place for residents to read a book; space for retail shops and restaurants and for a band to play a concert.

“We think there are so many opportunities for moments within the plaza, to stop and find yourself having a peaceful moment,” he said. “It's connecting people, connecting people in a public space.”

The city will host final reviews of the schematic design, starting with [a public meeting and commenting period](#) at 6 p.m. Wednesday, on City Hall's third floor.

By the fall, officials said, construction crews could begin foundational work to shore up the plaza's structural capacity and to lay out utility upgrades. And by the spring, work could begin on Phase I of the revitalization, a significant effort that would include the engagement center, the promenade, staging areas, shade areas, and new entrances to City Hall. The project has already been funded under the city's capital plan.



A proposed pavilion along Congress Street. (SASAKI ILLUSTRATION)

“This renovation will turn our seven-acre space into a welcoming, accessible space for all, featuring new civic spaces for events [and] areas for families to enjoy together,” Walsh said in a statement. “Creating a new People’s Plaza will help us achieve our goals of making one of Boston’s most-used public spaces better for all residents.”

In addition to expanded programming, the reconfiguration would include a practical and logistical change to the plaza, which was built 50 years ago to accommodate crowds of 40,000. City officials said the plaza has not seen a gathering of that size since the Boston Celtics celebration of the 1980s.



A view of the plaza overlooking Cambridge Street. (SASAKI ILLUSTRATION)

Under the new designs, an event area with staging would have a capacity of about 12,000 people, with a total limit of 25,000 people on the entire plaza. In addition to the main staging area, there would be at least two other gathering areas, as well as a flag-decorated speaker's podium.

The design would incorporate environmentally friendly strategies to absorb rainfall. The city would plant 100 trees to provide shade and cooling.

One of the more significant undertakings will involve the reconfiguration and reopening of the City Hall's North entrance – which was closed 17 years ago for security reasons – providing direct access to service areas such as the parking and the elections departments.

The “updates will bring the plaza into the modern century with improved infrastructure, sustainability, and public spaces,” said Isabel Zempel, landscape principal for Sasaki, the Watertown-based firm that designed the upgrades. “The plaza’s renovation will honor its original intentions and history, while making it a more accessible place for all.”

The undertaking involves the complete redesign of a plaza that Bostonians have loved to hate, a place considered an architectural blight to many. It drew gasps when it was first unveiled in the 1950s, after a design competition.

Walsh in his bid for mayor in 2013, had campaigned on abandoning City Hall with a proposal at the time to relocate municipal services so that the city could cut government costs and make better use of coveted real estate.

Walsh later withdrew that plan and prioritized the reenergizing of the plaza. The effort began in 2015 with a Rethink City Hall study to reimagine uses for the plaza and involved several sporadic attempts at programming. Some of these became popular, such as the installation of turf and Adirondack chairs on the plaza during the summer, along with yard games.



A view of the proposed plaza during the winter. (SASAKI ILLUSTRATION)

The city partnered with Boston Garden Development Corp. — a subsidiary of Delaware North, which owns and operates TD Garden — to test other events on the plaza, including Boston Winter, a seasonal marketplace, which had mixed success. More popular, according to city officials, was The

Patios, the summer-season outdoor beer garden that hosts themed events, such as a “pints and puppies” attraction to support animal shelters and promote animal adoptions.

Along the way, the administration reconfigured the inside of City Hall, laying out a popular mezzanine area on the third and fourth floors.



The adventure playscape proposed for the plaza. (SASAKI ILLUSTRATION)

Brophy said the different attempts over recent years laid out what type of programs the city could, and couldn't, do, along with the logistical challenges. The plaza is located above an abandoned subway tunnel, and in some areas the foundation is no more than a foot deep. The lack of utility networks created logistical challenges for the setup of certain events, forcing vendors in some cases to tie their electrical power sources right into City Hall. A ferris wheel had been envisioned for the area at one point, but that idea was scrapped.

The span from Cambridge Street to Congress Street also includes a 22-foot drop in grade, leading to other design challenges that obstructed access to many parts of the plaza. That access will improve under the new configurations, Brophy said.

Kate Tooke, a landscape architect with Sasaki, said the new plans respect the architectural design of City Hall and the plaza, incorporating the brick-carpet layout, granite banding that cuts through, and the open views toward City Hall.

She said her team has been in contact with preservation groups and other interested parties, as well as Michael McKinnell, one of the original architects of City Hall and the plaza.

“It’s about understanding the historic legacy of the plaza,” she said. “It’s really preserving the integrity of the original design while also updating it to make sure it reflects our 21st-century city.”

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