

Administration

To: Finance Committee

From: Mason Becker, Manager of Economic Development and Strategic Initiatives

Date: April 21, 2025

Subject: Rock River District

Background

Since at least 1982, when the Watertown Daily Times published work done by Steve Groth, then an architecture student who proposed a Watertown Cultural Center with a riverwalk, the concept of redevelopment of the City's downtown riverfront and creation of a continuous riverwalk has been a topic of public discussion.

- In 2007, Vandewalle & Associates worked with the City to create the *Watertown Riverwalk Arts and Interpretation Plan*, which called for creating a riverwalk.
- Building on that, in 2014, Redevelopment Resources worked with the City and released the *Watertown Riverfront and Downtown Development Initiative*. Much of the work called for in that document has been completed, including transitioning the previous CDA to the RDA, building the Bentzin Family Town Square, creating a Downtown Revolving Loan Fund, and more. That document also called for a riverwalk along the Rock River.
- In 2016, the City engaged with Ayres Associates to conduct design work for the riverwalk, though that design work was never acted on and no construction occurred due to other pressing needs.
- In 2019, the City's updated Comprehensive Plan also mentions expanding and completing the riverwalk in multiple sections of that document.

In the later part of 2023, following the successful completion and opening of the Bentzin Family Town Square, the Redevelopment Authority (RDA) board decided to pursue what was originally called the "*Downtown River Corridor Opportunity Analysis and Strategic Development Plan*," later renamed the "*Rock River District Vision*." More than just renewing plans for the riverwalk, the RDA also wanted to evaluate sites for targeted redevelopment and revitalization.

A public Request for Proposal (RFP) was released in January 2024, and eight submissions from qualified firms were received. After review and scoring, the RDA board selected the proposal from RINKA and Kapur to begin work on this planning project.

The gathering of public feedback and data included two well-advertised Community Open House events, held at the Watertown Public Library, where ideas and feedback were gathered. Part of this process also included online polling. Further, RINKA and Kapur facilitated a series of “steering committee meetings” with RDA board members and key City staff to further refine concepts.

Following approval by the RDA board, on October 28, 2024, the Rock River District Vision concept plan was presented to the City’s Plan Commission. The consensus from the Plan Commission was support for the project moving forward.

Since that meeting, the RDA has engaged with RINKA to work on cost estimating for the project. RINKA utilized a third-party firm, ADK Design, who have experience conducting cost estimating for similar public projects. After several sessions of review with members of City staff and the RDA board, the following cost breakdown and project sequencing is proposed.

The finalized version of the Rock River District Vision is available for review on the RDA website.

The plan document covers subjects such as activation of vacant and underutilized sites, and amenities enhancements. The purpose of this meeting’s agenda item is to discuss some of the major riverwalk infrastructure components that are called for in the plan.

Implementation of the proposed infrastructure components of the project (riverwalk additions, electrical lighting) are proposed to be included in the City’s Capital Improvement Plan (CIP). While recognizing that the CIP can change on a year-to-year basis, and items can be added, subtracted, or moved within it, we feel it is important to establish a timeline for implementation.

Budget Goal

- Proactively maintains and improves our parks and infrastructure to ensure safety, quality, and equity
- Maintains a safe and healthy community, with an eye toward future needs and trends

Financial Impact

Costs of these components, if placed in the City’s Capital Improvement Plan, would likely need to be borrowed for. Note that the following placeholder figures already exist for this project (these were based on the 2016 Ayres design estimates, and indexed for inflation):

2026: \$3,120,000

2027: \$2,450,000

2028: \$2,400,000

The RDA intends to pursue fundraising and grants to offset some of these costs, and increment funds from TID #8 could also be utilized, if available. We recognize that the CIP can change, and adjustments will occur during the City's annual budget process.

At the March 25, 2025 Public Works Commission meeting, the Commission reviewed the proposal, as well as the PowerPoint Presentation that will also be presented at this meeting. The Public Works Commission moved to request staff integrate the Rock River District infrastructure components into the City's CIP as a draft for review by the Finance Committee.

Recommendation

Direct City staff to place the Rock River District infrastructure components into the City's Capital Improvement Plan (CIP).