

Crystal City Business Improvement District

INNOVATION

The vision for a new pedestrian connection aims to create a new intermodal relationship that links Crystal City's transportation assets to enhance the downtown's accessibility, and in turn, its economic competitiveness. What seemed like a no-brainer to the BID, especially when glancing from the upper floors of buildings overlooking the airport terminals, however, was less obvious to those planning, designing and funding transportation investments locally, regionally and throughout the state. The BID initiated the study specifically to solidify a good idea into a realistic and understandable vision that could spark the imaginations of the public, elected officials and transportation operators. With sufficient momentum from a positive public reception combined with solid research scoping and engagement work, the project was well positioned for easy adoption by the appropriate implementation agency. An engaged working group made up of over 40 individuals representing 25 stakeholder agencies collaboratively guided the work of the consultant outlining opportunities as well as challenges. One challenge, identified through participation by the National Park Service, was the potential conflict with the agency's mission to preserve and protect the view corridors along the George Washington Memorial Parkway. Thoughtful dialogue resulted in including a possible tunnel alternative and considering ways for the bridge to enhance and highlight the presence of the parkway. Thus, the illustrative concept aims to show a light and gentle presence while embracing a park-like character that can celebrate the heritage of the parkway and serve as a new destination for residents, employees, and visitors.

OUTCOME

Though the connection is not yet built, the BID's Feasibility Study has been an extremely worthwhile investment. Not only did the study pave the way for inclusion in the Arlington County Capital Improvement Plan (CIP), but the resulting vision was well captured by the local and national media as a creative transportation investment. Further, the study and the illustrative renderings garnered sufficient interest from Amazon during the HQ2 search process, that the Commonwealth of Virginia included the project in the collection of five local projects funded through additional state commitments in their bid. Once constructed, a connection between Crystal City and the airport will enhance Crystal City's mobility and accessibility while strengthening the area's long-term economic sustainability. Specifically, the intermodal connection will help solve three key challenges preventing Crystal City from fully capitalizing on its proximity to the airport. First, the current walking connections between Crystal City and DCA are cumbersome, not ADA compliant, and an uncomfortable distance. Second, existing vehicular routes between Crystal City and DCA are approaching, or are at, capacity and are indirect. Third, existing transportation amenities serving thousands of passengers per day are not interconnected. This project will create a new iconic and memorable gateway to Crystal City, a feature that Crystal City largely lacks today. This permanent investment is expected to bolster the economic vitality and success of the region, which will benefit residents, developers, business owners and visitors. This project is part of Crystal City's plan to increase multimodal access and walkability, which benefits residents, employees, businesses and visitors alike.

EXECUTION

An RFP for the study was issued in mid-July 2017 with the contract awarded to VHB and the project started in mid-August 2017. The study effort was divided into three phases – Discover, Synthesize, and Plan – with one public information session at the project's outset, a series of three working group meetings with over 40 individuals with 25 stakeholder groups, and individual scoping meetings with key impacted parties including the National Park Service, MWAA, JBG SMITH, VRE, CSX, AMTRAK and others. Through this process, the consultant developed several alternative alignments, established evaluation criteria in collaboration with the working group, and formulated a determination of feasibility, a preferred alternative alignment, and recommendations for next steps. Perhaps the most powerful product that came from the study was the collection of illustrative renderings to depict what a potential pedestrian connection could look and feel like. These images, along with the results of the study, were shared with the public at a November public meeting. A final CC2DCA Pedestrian Connection Feasibility Study document was published in February 2018 along with a public-facing website and an Executive Summary marketing brochure to easily share the study results.

REPRESENTATION

The Crystal City BID was the project champion, project manager and funder of the CC2DCA Pedestrian Feasibility Study. As a thought leader and convener, the BID worked closely with the consultant to design a process that was inclusive of both the public, as well as key stakeholders, some of which have mission's that may not align directly with the goals of the BID's vision. Over 40 individuals representing 25 stakeholder groups participated in three working group sessions that informed the process. Stakeholders included departments of Arlington County government, Arlington Economic Development, MWAA, National Park Service, National Capital Planning Commission, VRE, WMATA, Amtrak, JBG SMITH, and others. The consultant also conducted one-on-one meetings with key stakeholders directly impacted by a new pedestrian connection. Four public information sessions (two dates each with daytime and evening meetings) were also held – one at the start of the process and one at the conclusion. The meetings were held overlooking the airport to help the community visualize the airport's proximity. Creative engagement exercises including "pin the tail on the trail" helped encourage the community to participate. Public meetings were broadcast on Facebook Live to expand the reach to the community garnering over 2,000 views.

REPLICATION

Though some BID's have begun to take on implementation of larger scale infrastructure projects, many simply do not have the staff, expertise or budget. The CC2DCA Pedestrian Connection Feasibility Study is an excellent example of how a downtown organization or public interest group can help transform a creative idea into a real infrastructure project. Combining the BID roles of marketing organization, thought leader and stakeholder convener with the expertise and knowledge of an appropriate consulting group can result in a powerful and compelling story and/or vision that can be used to captivate the imaginations of the public, the market place and the business community. Illustrative renderings combined with a strong vision statement that outlines bold aspirations make for excellent media coverage as well as social media content. Key to the success of this kind of effort is an authentic embracing of a spirit of partnership that aims to collaboratively craft this vision together as a community, not just dictate it.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

By all measures, the underlying project of building a new pedestrian connection to the airport is exceptionally complex. Various hurdles exist to getting approvals from various federal agencies, not to mention the necessary funding to implement. These obstacles likely hindered others from pursuing what to many is a no-brainer, even those with the power and the purse strings to make it happen. The BID recognized these obstacles and did not aim to solve them outright, but rather bring the appropriate stakeholders to the table in a thoughtful and engaging process exploring the possible, as well as collaboratively crafting a vision. Overcoming challenges and obstacles is much easier when a compelling vision is in place and when key decision makers (or breakers) are brought into the fold as equal and valued members of a partnership. Though there is still much work to be done (not the least of which is obtaining the necessary approvals from the National Park Service), but the added momentum behind inclusion in the County CIP and Virginia's Infrastructure Investment Package for Amazon's HQ2 suggests that we may very well be enjoying a 5-minute walk to the airport very soon.