

Public art programs at Library Square considered

Library Square, once complete, is intended to be a community draw, and integral in that draw is public art.

How that public art should be shaped, however, was a question for Council last month as they considered a motion from Councillor Sandra Humfryes.

Building upon a presentation made to Council late last fall from Arts Help, a non-profit network of more than 2.5 million members developing impactful projects and programming as a vehicle for social change, Councillor Humfryes called on staff to begin engaging with creatives looking to leave their mark on the downtown revitalization project.

Arts Help has already outlined some of the ways they are looking to leave their own mark, having presented Council with a bold vision for digital art throughout the new facility. While a public art policy is yet to be fully hammered out by staff and lawmakers, Councillor Humfryes said it is time to begin those conversations with groups who might be able to deliver.

I believe there may be an opportunity to utilize their skills and their resources to help our vision for Library Square and the incredible local artists and local art we would be working with, she said. I would really like to hear more about them and I would love staff to investigate and see what, if anything, they could participate in or be a part of with digital communication for our Library Square.

I would love staff to take a little time just to come back with a report to see if they see a fit for this type of support, skillset, expertise and go from there.

The motion received mixed reaction, with staff stating they were reluctant to engage in discussions with one particular organization before going out for expressions of interest from the arts community as a whole, and some Council members offering a preference for a finalized public art policy before moving forward.

I share the comments that it was a great presentation and it looks like a very interesting organization [but] I am trying to wrap my head around understanding what we're trying to do here, said Councillor John Gallo. My understanding when they came to us it was their interpretation they would take on that role of supplying the public art segment of the budget and what we're going to do with Library Square.

If we're trying to find a multimedia, multi-digital company to provide some services to us, then we need to agree that we go out and we find companies that do that and we follow the process and go out to tender and do all of that. If this is a simple exercise to understand, to have staff connect with them and understand what they do in order to facilitate eventual implementation on public art display, okay, they can be one of many that end up contributing.

To me, if this is part of a bigger picture that we figure out how we're going to address public art at Library Square there has to be a bigger picture in terms of how we determine who ends up doing public art.

Director of Community Services Robin McDougall said that following the passage of the motion they would meet with Arts Help to achieve a better understanding on their objectives and what is ultimately being proposed. Concurrently, a public art policy would continue to be developed and, in turn, a procurement process to have such art installed at Library Square.

I want to be very sensitive in how far we go with the dialogue with Arts Help because I wouldn't want to go too far [down] a path if we [then] steer with a public procurement process. In the end it looks as though we're engaging and supporting one entity when others may have an interest, she said. I would see this as [first] to get a better understanding of what their proposal could entail but not dig too deep into detail.

But, to Councillor Humfryes, what was being proposed by Arts Help is 'very different' from what could come under the umbrella of a public art policy.

'They are a digital communications vehicle to share and communicate out what is happening at Library Square,' she said. 'To me, it is very different. The arts policy was supposed to be a percentage off every project put into a fund where we determined where do we want to place art, spend on art.'

In December, Arts Help pitched a vision for an 'interactive digital network' which would see digital screens permanently installed within Library Square. These screens, they said, could showcase local community members, including non-traditional artists like graphic designers and build a grassroots 'online community' that would be a portal for artists to upload, submit and vote on digital programming.

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