

Sunset Boulevard ‘Belltower’ Project Draws Praise and Criticism

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Proposed ‘Belltower’ digital billboard on Sunset Boulevard (Orange Barrel Media / Tom Wiscombe Architects)

West Hollywood’s proposed “Belltower” digital billboard/art structure planned for the Sunset Strip received both glowing reviews and sharp criticism during Thursday’s meeting of the Design Review subcommittee of the city’s Planning Commission.

The three-sided, 72-foot tall structure planned for the old Tower Records overflow parking lot (which the city now owns), just east of the Sunset Boulevard-Horn Avenue-Holloway Drive intersection, will have digital screens on two sides that will feature advertisements 75% of the time and is recommended to offer special digital art displays the other 25% of the time.

The city will profit from the digital advertisements displayed during that 75% of the time, but under the proposal reviewed by the committee it would provide the 25% display time to artists for free. The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) would curate the digital art displayed on the screens, with the city’s Arts and Cultural Affairs Commission having final approval over all the art displayed.

Conceived by [Orange Barrel Media](#) in conjunction with Los Angeles-based architect [Tom Wiscombe](#), after winning a city-sponsored competition, the proposed “Belltower” would be built in three vertical panels of perforated, reinforced aluminum connected via a skeletal frame. The public would be able to walk inside the space between the three vertical panels.

A plaza area is planned around the “Belltower.” Five parking spaces will be eliminated to create the plaza.

The project is named the “Belltower” because architect Wiscombe wants to mimic the tall clock tower in the Piazza San Marco in Venice, Italy. However, he does not plan for it to make any sounds.

The digital screens on the two sides facing Sunset Boulevard will be dimmed to reduce glare at night, while the backside, which faces the residential area north of Sunset, will not have digital screens.

Commissioner David Aghaei liked the piece a lot, calling it “well designed.”

Similarly, Commissioner Rogerio Carvalheiro, an architect and former member of the Arts and Cultural Affairs Commission, praised the piece calling it a “beautifully designed piece of art.”

“I quite love this piece,” Carvalheiro said. “It’s going to be ethereal. You’re going to want to go there.” In fact, Carvalheiro, noting the constant call for more green space in the city, suggested expanding the plaza area and transforming the entire parking lot into a park with this Belltower as the centerpiece.

Carvalheiro also liked the fact that it embraces our society’s ever changing relationship with various digital media. “This has to be seen as much more than just a billboard,” Carvalheiro said. “It is something that integrates itself into our community and into our lives via art, via information, via advertising at times. It will change. It is organic. It is making an attempt to be organic. I encourage you to think of it on a broader sense than just the billboards that have been there to date.”

However, several residents living in the West Hollywood Heights neighborhood due north of the site were opposed to it. Resident Elyse Eisenberg was the most vocal, calling it “tacky” and an “embarrassing project.”

“This is a case of the emperor has no clothes,” Eisenberg said. “The reality is, it’s a billboard . . . the city is building a plaza around a billboard.”

She also criticized the attempts to compare it to well-known, tall European sites like the Piazza San Marco in Venice, the Eiffel Tower in Paris or Big Ben in London. “The city is delusional about it. I’m sorry but [the architect is] delusional for comparing it to Big Ben, San Marco, the Eiffel Tower,” Eisenberg said. “It’s a laughing stock that this is going to be presented, that the city is going to believe this kind of presentation. A billboard in a parking lot? The Eiffel Tower? Please.”

Resident Ann Goldman felt it was not a good project for the neighborhood. “If you want to keep the character of our neighborhood, a huge billboard is not the way to do it,” Goldman said.

Meanwhile, resident Laura Meltzer was grateful to learn that the rumored skateboarding park area was not a part of the plan, but worried the plaza area will attract homeless people. “The residents of our area, while we are a compassionate group, we will not tolerate building an invitation for homeless people to set up campgrounds there,” Meltzer said.

Resident Lynn Russell felt the design presented needed further thought, saying, “it’s a concept, but not yet a project.”

Commissioners John Altschul and Sue Buckner, who normally sit on the Design Review subcommittee, recused themselves from the discussion as they both live within 500 feet of the project site.

The Belltower project is scheduled to go before the city’s Arts and Cultural Affairs Commission for review on Nov. 16. A community meeting regarding the project is also planned for Dec. 19. If feedback from those two meetings is favorable, the Belltower is tentatively scheduled to go before the full Planning Commission in February and to the City Council for final approval in April.



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