City of Palo Alto Staff Report to Public Art Commission

December 12, 2018

Title: Approval of conceptual proposal for four artworks by artist Peter Wegner for the new Public Safety Building.

Background
The City intends to construct a new Public Safety Building at 250 Sherman Avenue and a new California Avenue Area Parking Garage on 350 Sherman Avenue. Under the California Environmental Quality Act, these are considered as a single project as the garage will mitigate the loss of approximately 310 existing public surface parking spaces on both sites.

On December 10, 2018, Council authorized award of construction contract for the parking garage at 350 Sherman Avenue. The design includes enhancements to the Birch Street frontage, creating an appealing interface between the garage and pedestrian sidewalk. The proposed design of the PSB is a 3-story structure over an operational basement and received full Council approval with a Record of Land Use Action on November 5, 2018 (Staff Report #9658). The PSB design also includes many new public amenities for the Birch Street frontage across from the new garage. Additional information is available through the project website at https://www.cityofpaloalto.org/publicsafetybldg.

Discussion
Art Budget and Artist Selection Process
At the time of the call for artists the budgeted amount Public Safety Building was $55.5M, yielding an art budget of $555,000. The current estimated budget for the commission of artwork is approximately $650,000- $700,000, excluding the funds that will be set aside for the maintenance and care of the commissioned artworks as part of this CIP budget. Due to the specialized nature of the facility, staff launched an open call for artists for this commission and highlighted several potential sites for art integration. Sixty-three artists submitted their qualifications for consideration. Staff pared the list down to twenty-two potential artists for the commission. The selection panel made up of key stakeholders and arts professionals included:

Colette Chew – Engineer, Public Works
Geoffrey Blackshire – Deputy Fire Chief, PAFD
Kenneth Dueker – Director, Emergency Services (OES Chief)
Loren Gordon – Public Art Commissioner and Palo Alto Resident
Mallory Cusenbery - Principal Architect, RossDrulisCusenbery Architecture
Michael Ekwall - La Bodeguita del Medio owner, California Ave
Patty Lum – Assistant Police Chief, PAPD
Rhyena Halpern – Director, Arts & Sciences Division / Assistant Director, CSD
The selection panel convened December 18, 2017 and selected four finalists for the project. Those artists traveled to Palo Alto to give public presentations about their work January 29, 2018 at the Community Room of City Hall. These interviews were open to the public and offered an opportunity for the public to give input to the selection panel prior to making their decision on the project artist. Based on the presentations and interviews, the panel recommended Peter Wegner as the project artist for the Public Safety Building.

As stated on his website: Peter Wegner is an American artist and graduate of Yale University. Wegner’s practice focuses on systems – of color, language, architecture and mapping. For Wegner, systems are rarely systematic. They are contingent, ad hoc, incomplete. Hence his paradoxical artwork: walls made of paper, buildings made of sky, monuments to the process of change itself.

His CV and artist statement he submitted with his application were attached to the staff report to the Public Art Commission dated February 15, 2018. His works are in prestigious private collections and museums worldwide, including The Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Guggenheim Museum, The Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the J. Paul Getty Museum. The Public Art Commission approved Peter Wegner as the project artist for the Public Safety Building February 15, 2018.

The Concept Development Process
Once the design contract was signed, Peter Wegner began a lengthy research process to inform his concepts for the site. The goals for the public art on the site are:

- Create artwork(s) inspired by the Palo Alto Police Department, Fire Department and Office of Emergency Services core values.
- Create artwork(s) which will enhance the PSB’s civic presence.
- Create artwork(s) that will be well-integrated in the architecture, appropriate to the style and scale of the new public safety facility, while supporting the integrity of the PSB and the critical operations that occur inside.
- Create artwork(s) compatible with the unique character and heritage of California Avenue and surrounding area.

Wegner travelled to Palo Alto to meet with members of the Fire Department, Police Department, and Office of Emergency Services, as well as toured the various facilities to gain a better understanding of the kinds of situations the staff for these departments handles daily. For example, Wegner accompanied an officer on a police ride-along, rode in a Fire Truck with PAFD responding to emergency calls, visited the 911 dispatch center, met with the forensics team, and toured the Mobile Emergency Operations Center (MEOC) as part of his research. Wegner had numerous in-person and online meetings with the design team for the building, and many more meetings with Public Art staff. Wegner conducted hundreds of hours of research online as well as sending questions through Public Art staff to appropriate departments to understand the intended use and audience in various spaces on the site.

Wegner spent a lot of time getting to know the California Avenue community as part of his research. During his visits to Palo Alto he asked about the differences between California Avenue and University
Avenue, and what makes California Avenue different. He walked the avenue on multiple occasions, visiting the shops and talking to people, and trying to get a feel for how people will encounter the PSB site. Public Art staff conducted a California Avenue community meeting in June 2018 in which members of the community were invited to meet the artist and give him information to help him understand the Cal Ave community and what makes that neighborhood special. Some of the key takeaways from that meeting and the accompanying online survey were:

- California Avenue is for Palo Altans, University Avenue belongs to the larger region
- Cal Ave reflects the original Mayfield community with a growing tech presence
- Cal Ave is diverse in age, ethnicity, and language. The population during the day is different than at night.
- “Keep Cal Ave weird”, Cal Ave is known for interesting locally owned shops and restaurants that know their clientele.
- Many regulars to Cal Ave come on bike or on foot.

Rather than creating one artwork, Wegner is proposing a suite of four artworks together for the site. Two artworks are proposed for the lobby that are closely influenced by his time with the staff of the departments at the PSB and the work they do, one artwork on the exterior façade of the PSB that links the work performed inside the building with the community, and a large piece on the recessed corner of the upcoming parking structure across Birch street from the PSB that reflects the Cal Ave community and relates to the other works. The works at the PSB site are in the color palette identified with the emergency responders, the artwork at the garage will incorporate that palette and more colors reflecting the broader Cal Ave community. The large garage piece will be optimally viewed from the PSB plaza and help animate that plaza space.

Feedback on the Proposals to Date
Public Art staff held a meeting November 28, 2018 with representatives from the Palo Alto Police Department, Palo Alto Fire Department, Office of Emergency Management, Public Works Engineering, the Director of Community Services Department and Libraries, Nova Partners, and the architects for the PSB project to discuss the concepts. The feedback was extremely positive for the concepts, letting staff and the artist know that the concepts were “on track”. Some of the feedback on the finger print based piece were considered and design changes were made prior to the presentation to the community. There was some discussion regarding materials and installation details to prevent damage to the artworks. Those conversations will continue as the artist goes into detailed design and coordinates logistics with the design team.

Staff hosted a community meeting at the Palo Alto Central Community Room December 6th to present the concepts to the community and seek feedback. The overall feedback was positive, letting staff and Wegner know that they felt the artworks reflected the purpose and mission of the building as well as the community of California Avenue. A link to an abridged version of the presentation can be found here.

Maintenance of Artworks:
One of the concerns brought up was regarding the maintenance of the artworks, and in particular the one LED artwork on the parking structure. According to the artist’s consultant, he half-life for LEDs operating at 100% illumination is 100,000 hours (Las Vegas lights use 80% illumination during day and 20% at night). The half-life is not when the LEDs will fail, but when they may begin to lose strength and fade. Wegner proposes using a fraction of the illumination to achieve the subtlety of color he intends. Additionally, staff and the artist clarified that the artwork may only be running limited hours, both
expanding the lifespan of the modules and allowing staff to set appropriate hours for the artwork based on community feedback. It is also important to note that to the best of the design team’s knowledge, the LED artwork will not be visible from the apartments on Park Blvd. Public Art Staff clarified that a detailed maintenance plan will be part of the agreement and the funds for that maintenance of all four artworks will be set aside as part of the commissioning process out of the 1% for public art budget. All artworks – like other City facilities and equipment – require regular maintenance. The phase 2 contract will specify terms about the expected lifespan of the artworks and how they are maintained.

Use of Plastic:
One of the concerns raised was regarding the use of plastic in one of the interior artworks. Based on that input, the artist has researched the use of recycled ABS plastic in the artwork, which should not be a problem to source. Additionally, it appears that the artwork could be recycled at the end of its lifespan as well. Staff and the artist will continue to explore these options.

LED artwork on the Garage:
One stakeholder asked that the team consider how much natural light and air might be blocked at the corner opening by the sculptural garage work. The artwork may be viewed from various levels of the garage, and the side plane of the artwork facing the garage will have artwork programmed on it, so it will not be a plain dark surface. The artwork will be set back from the garage opening to prevent tampering and allow for natural light to enter the garage. The design team will study this issue and make sure the artwork has minimal impact to natural light entering the garage adjacent to the piece. The artwork may need to scale down, shift toward Jacaranda, or have a modified profile to ensure that the artwork doesn’t interfere with the visitor experience. The artwork is only in the conceptual phase and may need to shift as the team gets into detailed design. The garage is an open-air garage, so blocking air is not an issue.

A question was raised regarding energy usage of the LED modules. The LED technology is highly efficient. At the current scale, the artist estimates that the artwork will annually draw approximately the same average electricity as 1.5 households, or a daily draw less than what is required to charge a Tesla. The design team and the artist will continue to investigate the energy consumption and make the piece as efficient as possible.

Timeline and Environmental Impact
The Parking structure must be completed prior to beginning construction on the new Public Safety Building. The Cal Ave Garage is currently scheduled to break ground in January 2019 and construction will last approximately one year. The new Public Safety Building is expected to begin construction immediately following the opening of the garage and is anticipated to be complete in late 2021.

Should the PAC approve the conceptual design, then Peter Wegner will begin detailed design immediately and enter into a fabrication and installation contract. The timeline for the artwork on the garage is especially critical to ensure that the infrastructure to support the artwork is in the plans for the garage as soon as possible.

The design team has conferred with the artist and manufacturers of the proposed LED modules to confirm that the artwork falls within the parameters of the Environmental Impact Report for the Cal Ave Garage or Public Safety Building. The light levels will be well within city requirements preventing light pollution.