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Design Perspectives: WSCC addition's public benefits: How much is enough?

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Time and money are limited, and the line of good ideas is long. But there are no rules about how to pick what “public benefits” should come from the largest downtown project we've seen in a generation: the \$1.6 billion expansion of the Washington State Convention Center.

The project is going to erase more than an acre of street segments, and city laws say Seattle is owed public benefits in exchange for that loss.

But there are no rules about what counts as a benefit and how much is enough.

Open spaces with plantings, paving, maybe a stage? Affordable housing for the hundreds of people who will work in the new building? How about some funding for Freeway Park, a neglected legacy from the original freeway-spanning convention center?



Image by LMN Architects [\[enlarge\]](#)

The WSCC expansion includes eight outdoor public areas designed for sitting, strolling and performances. But critics say one of the areas, the \$17 million rooftop Terrace, should not count as a public benefit.

These questions face the city as the WSCC project slowly moves through approvals. On one hand is Pine Street Group, the hired developer that is managing the project and its budget. On the other hand is a cluster of community groups asking for more, and they've coalesced around benefits they call the Community Package. In the middle is the Seattle Design Commission, which is hearing these requests and will advise Seattle City Council, which has the ultimate say.

It won't be easy for the commission and council to decide what's enough public benefit, what it should look like and where the money will come from.

This expansion project will be big. Along with underground exhibit space and co-developments, it will cover the equivalent of several city blocks and rise five stories above the sidewalk just north of Pine Street and across from the Paramount Theatre.

Construction will take out three alleys and two streets within the footprint of the project, but the two streets will be replaced after below-grade construction is complete. The site is three irregular blocks bounded by Pine Street, Ninth Avenue, Howell Street and Boren Avenue.

(Editor's note: The story has been changed to clarify that two streets will be replaced.)

While the city weighs open space, art, housing and street improvements, it shouldn't lose sight of the biggest potential public benefit of all: the design of the WSCC addition itself. And it's looking good: multi-faceted, open and inviting, with visible stairs and large indoor areas visible to people passing by outside.

Space, time, money

Design by LMN Architects continues while the project team tries to get a nod from the SDC on public benefits.



Image by ZGF Architects [\[enlarge\]](#)

This view of Pike Street shows improvements that would help connect downtown and Capitol Hill as part of the Pike Pine Renaissance plan. Pine Street Group has proposed contributing \$12 million toward this as a public benefit.

Last month, landscape architect Shannon Nichol of Gustafson Guthrie Nichol showed slides of a number of small open spaces carved out of the project at the street level, one of them with a performance stage and seating. The most significant of these spaces is a verdant, mid-level rooftop landscape the size of a small city park — called the Terrace. It would be open and accessible, to anyone, much of the day.

But the Terrace won't be public enough, according to community critics and some members of the SDC. Here's how Commission Director Michael Jenkins summarized their concerns: “Who would use it, how would they use it, and why would they use it?”

The design team is hoping to answer those questions at its next SDC appearance, likely this fall. Ideas include somehow making the Terrace more visible from the street and making the access stairs more inviting to the public, with interpretive graphics.

How long will SDC's review take? There's no definite answer on that, either.

“At this point we need to make this results driven — and not apply a calendar to it,” said Jenkins. He said the SDC is waiting to see what design changes are made in response to the community's concerns and desires.

Matt Griffin of Pine Street Group is less sanguine about the timeline. Construction is scheduled to start next year, with the addition to open in 2021. Budget and timeline are intricately related and vulnerable, he noted, and delays in the publicly funded project are expensive.

SDC is in a tough position. It knows design quality counts — a lot — and that means physical features. “This is the city's consulting firm on urban design,” said Jenkins.

But someone has to do the counting, especially when off-site “public benefits” are involved. Cash contributions to programs and projects that are not actually part of the main project are sometimes called “in-lieu” funding. Square footage and time are quantifiable, too.

Griffin estimates the value of on-site and off-site public benefits that Pine Street Group has proposed at \$47 million. Alex Hudson of the First Hill Improvement Association, one of the organizations behind the Community Package, has said she thinks it should be \$60 million to \$75 million, based on the value of packages for other large downtown developments, public and private, that involve street vacations.

Griffin puts the value of the public benefits at the street level on the project site at \$8 million, in addition to \$17 million for the rooftop Terrace. So far, there is \$2 million dedicated to public art.

Spreading the benefits



Image by LMN Architects [\[enlarge\]](#)

This plaza at Ninth Avenue and Pine Street is part of the WSCC addition.

There's a chunk of in-lieu funding already in place. Of the \$47 million package now proposed by Pine Street Group, the biggest piece — next to the rooftop Terrace — is a \$12 million contribution to Pike Pine Renaissance, a slate of planned enhancements along Pike and Pine streets that would help link Capitol Hill and the waterfront. Funds from the WSCC addition would pay for work between Ninth and Melrose avenues, as they cross Interstate 5 next to the project.

Marshall Foster heads Seattle's Office of the Waterfront and manages the Pike Pine Renaissance project for the city. He said it's not a surprise Pine Street Group wants to help fund the proposed Pike-Pine improvements. "There is," Foster said, "a clear, shared understanding about the opportunity this represents."

In other words, it's going to happen. Maybe that's the difference between the public benefits Pine Street Group has committed to, and those it has not. The Pike Pine Renaissance has solid backing from the city and from the Downtown Seattle Association, a business group increasingly involved in sponsoring downtown open space.

The Community Package, on the other hand, favors funding to restore and improve access to Freeway Park, which was built alongside the original Washington State Convention Center.

Together, the two are the original bridge over the I-5 gash, connecting downtown and Capitol Hill.

But the forested park has hard-to-find pathways and cliff-like concrete walls, and has been criticized for lack of visibility, accessibility and safety. The Freeway Park Association is planning improvements, but only \$1 million from the WSCC addition budget has been pledged so far. Community Package groups are asking for \$10 million.

Then there's housing. The Community Package calls for more affordable housing downtown, citing the hundreds of service-sector workers needed to run the convention center. The WSCC addition was vested before the city passed a law that requires all new downtown projects to contribute to affordable housing. Under this law, Hudson of the First Hill group calculates the project would have had to put up about \$23 million instead of the \$5 million now pledged.

The Community Package coalition is also pressing for more I-5 lids, beginning with a small platform next to Plymouth Pillars Park and study of a more extensive structure.

It goes on. These are very real public benefits, deserving public support. Where will the money come from?

Last time the complex calculations of funding the WSCC project through 2020 were made, based on interest rates and hotel-motel tax revenues over time, the budget was about \$200 million in the hole. That could change, according to Griffin, when the numbers are done again in a few months.

In a memo last month to city officials, community groups complained that the project still funds only 25 percent of the Community Package. “And we've value-engineered the Community Package ask,” said Hudson.

The coalition has done a little value engineering on the WSCC addition, too. According to a memo sent to SDC and City Council members last month, they want to keep the Terrace, but don't want it counted as a public benefit. And they want to strike smaller items like \$1 million in restored lighting for the historic Camlin Hotel and Paramount Theater signs, citing the fact that these signs are on private property.

The details matter

Removing the Terrace and a few smaller features from the public benefit pie will not yield enough savings in the project budget to cover the Community Package.

So far, the size of the WSCC budget hinges on the limits of an existing hotel-motel tax.

Turns out Griffin, like Hudson, is looking to an expanded tax base to cover the project plus “public benefit.” That could happen if HB 2015 — the so-called Airbnb and HomeAway tax (on lodging with under 60 rooms) proposed last year — gets passed. But they have not deliberated on it yet in Olympia, and I'm not holding my breath.

Ultimately, deciding on the best public benefits to fund takes research, planning and design — all of which are expensive and time consuming, and backing is in short supply. So far, city government has shown limited interest in long-range city-building initiatives like lidding

more of I-5 or investing in sidewalk paving standards. Maybe that will change with a new administration. But then again, the change in administrations is part of the problem.

High quality urban design benefits the public. It's not easy to count, but it's the job of the SDC to extract as much design benefit as possible from the WSCC project and its changing budget, despite having no easy way to measure benefits.

Job one for the design team and the SDC is making sure the addition is a unique place that makes Seattle better for the public. We will never have a Times Square, thank goodness, but details count. We have the grand old signs on the Camlin and the Paramount. They deserve love — and lighting design — for the future, because they help to tell convention goers — and the rest of us, we are in downtown Seattle and not just any booming city.

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