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Inner Arbor plans 'wow' Howard Co. design panel



By Luke Lavoie, llavoie@tribune.com

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The Inner Arbor Trust's presentation for an arts park in Symphony Woods was given a stamp of approval by Howard County's Design Advisory Panel Wednesday, signaling a milestone for development plans that would bring a series of attractions to 16.5 acres in downtown Columbia's Symphony Woods.

"First of all, 'wow,' " said Rob Hollis, an architect and member of the seven-member volunteer panel of design and architecture professionals.

"I'm very impressed with the scope of the presentation, the variety, the thought that's gone into every component of this. It's

rare."

Hollis and four other panel members in attendance voted to "support the design as submitted," following a two-hour-plus presentation.

The purpose of the panel is to evaluate plans for downtown Columbia, and other designated redevelopment areas in the county, for quality of design and compatibility with neighboring structures. All developers with projects in downtown Columbia are required to present to the panel twice as part of a 16-step approval process.

Wednesday's presentation was the trust's second for Symphony Woods, and it differed from the original concept that was met with mixed reviews.

The current design for the 35-acre park, which is owned by the Columbia Association, includes a guest services building made of glass and mirrors called the Butterfly, an outdoor, shell-like amphitheater built into a hill called the Chrysalis, a 300-foot-long floating picnic table, and the Caterpillar, an 800-foot-long, 15-foot-high tube dividing the park from neighboring Merriweather Post Pavilion.

The project, details of which were announced in December, is expected to cost nearly \$30 million, which the Trust, a 501(c)(3) organization, expects to raise through grants and donations.

Two late additions to the design formally introduced on Wednesday include a 9,000-square-foot playscape called the Merriground -- which will feature rope swings, two slides, a 46-foot tower and other non-traditional play features -- and an auditory component called Merriweather Horns.

Merriweather Horns, which are designed by artist William Cochran, known locally for painting the mural on the Community Bridge in Frederick, are sculptural horns located throughout the park that will play high-quality music and soundscapes.

The park will also have an elaborate, meandering pathway system designed by Baltimore-based landscape design firm Mahan Rykiel. The pathways will be between 8- to 10-feet wide on average and will include boardwalks over marshy and swale areas of the park. At large gathering points, the pathways will grow to 15 and sometimes 25 feet, creating a type of plaza.

Approximately 25 trees will be removed for the pathway system, which is fewer than half in the original plan, according to Mahan Rykiel. The firm is also responsible for making the forest healthier, which includes phasing in new trees and planting diverse vegetation.

Trust President Michael McCall said he and the design team -- made up of designers, artists and architects with international experience -- were "very pleased" with the outcome. "We are very grateful," McCall said.

McCall added that approval meant a "great deal" to him personally because it was the panel's July 2011 criticism of the original plan, which called for a fountain in the center of the park, that motivated him to come up with an alternative.

"It got me involved. They (the panel) didn't know it, but it got me involved," he said.

Panel member Don Taylor compared the two plans and described the new one as "visionary."

"I can't leave without saying when we saw the original presentation, I think the consensus was there was a lack of vision in the original scheme. I think we've gone to the opposite end of the scale this time," he said.

While the response was positive, there were questions, including how it will interface with nearby Merriweather Post Pavilion.

"We take all the operational questions very seriously, we just have to get there," McCall said. "We have to get our plans approved and start building."

The panel also voted to have the trust review the pathway width near the entrance to the park closest to The Mall in Columbia.

McCall said the next step is to submit updated plans to Howard County's Department of Planning and Zoning, which he expects to do in March or early April.

McCall said he hopes to be through the county approval process by summer and could begin construction on the amphitheater and other aspects of the arts park in the fall.

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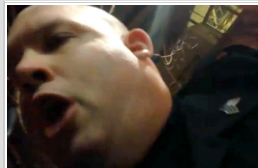
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cwals99 at 11:14 AM February 27, 2014

The question for MD citizens is why, at a time that the Federal, State, and local governments are starved for revenue from massive corporate fraud and tax evasion are we watching as the state and local governments leverage the public sector with so much credit bond and Wall Street financial instrument debt while development like this occurs? We all love the arts but the state is in a near depression with record unemployment and high debt from borrowing to build. IT'S A DEPRESSION FOLKS! MD is at 36% unemployment and the state and Baltimore budgets involve tons of leveraging and tax break revenue that creates long-term debt. THIS IS BAD DEVELOPMENT!

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