City Recommends Replacing Parker Center With 27-Story Tower

A $475 Million Proposal Would Raze Old Police Headquarters and Centralize City Offices

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By Donna Evans

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES — The vacant Parker Center should be demolished and a 27-story tower housing a variety of city offices should rise in its place, according to a recommendation from the City Department of Public Works and the Bureau of Engineering.

The city for years has pondered what to do with the dilapidated 1954 former police headquarters, which became obsolete when most Los Angeles Police Department functions left the building in 2009 for the new $440 million Police Administration Building on First Street. An environmental impact report called for studying several options, including reusing all or parts of the aged building at 150 N. Los Angeles St.

However, after examining the possibilities, city officials have called for razing the bedraggled structure and building a 27-story tower in its place. The proposal, which has an initial budget of $475 million, will be presented to the City Council this summer, said Deborah Weintraub, interim city engineer.

The new building would house multiple municipal departments, such as General Services, Personnel and possibly Public Works, allowing the city to bring together employees from some far-flung locations, said Weintraub.

“A building this size would allow us to consolidate a lot of staff and terminate leases at other remote city-owned facilities. It would centralize a lot of people, which would help staff and residents,” she said.

The Bureau of Engineering is recommending including retail space on the first floor of the new structure. The proposed facility would offer WiFi, a high-tech conference room, a cafeteria or cafe and amenities such as a health club, possibly with a pool. Initial plans also call for a public courtyard with landscaping that would provide a pedestrian connection between Los Angeles and Judge John Aiso streets.

Additionally, the project calls for an enclosed pedestrian bridge connecting the structure to City Hall East. An emergency helipad would be on the roof and a garage with more than 1,100 spaces would rise on the site of Parker Center’s existing parking lot.

According to the initial plans, demolition would proceed on a floor-by-floor process — similar to what occurred at the Wilshire Grand Hotel, and meaning no wrecking ball or dynamiting — and last eight to 10 months. Construction of the new building would start in 2016 and last 18-24 months, with completion anticipated in 2018.

The project is in the early stage and no renderings have yet been created, Weintraub said. Although the firm Gensler did some initial planning for the EIR analysis, no architect for the new building has been chosen.

Activate the ‘Dead Zone’

The plan to eliminate an aged eyesore is drawing praise from longtime Downtown Los Angeles observers. Dan Rosenfeld, president of the George Crenshaw Development Company and a former public-sector real estate official who has long called for centralizing government buildings in Downtown, said the project has the opportunity to breathe life back into an area that can seem like a “dead zone.”
“This will also be an opportunity to start to correct one of the biggest deficiencies in the Civic Center: the lack of street-facing retail,” Rosenfeld said in an email. “Every new building in the Civic Center, including city buildings, should be required to fill all its street frontage with attractive public uses such as shops and restaurants.”

Rosenfeld noted that bringing together multiple city departments in a new building would save money and improve public access to government. He pointed out that the project echoes recommendations he made in the 1997 Civic Center Shared Facilities and Enhancement Plan. The document, sometimes called the Ten Minute Diamond Plan, suggested housing government workers within a 10-minute walk in all directions of City Hall.

Mahmood Karimzadeh, principal architect for the Bureau of Engineering, agreed that the project has the potential to activate the Civic Center. He also said that a new facility could be designed to meet modern technological needs rather than working in a more antiquated structure, such as the Personnel Department building in the Arts District.

Weintraub noted that although the recommendation is to raze and replace Parker Center, no formal decision has been made, and city officials could choose one of the other options laid out in a 2013 Environmental Impact Report. She also said that funds for the new development have not yet been identified.

The proposal also drew the praise of Bob Harris, the director of Landscape Architecture at the School of Architecture at the University of Southern California and a chair of Mayor Tom Bradley’s 60-member Downtown Strategic Plan Advisory Committee in 1989. He called the project a “fantastic opportunity” for the city to turn the area into a significant public magnet.

Being largely vacant for five years has left the area around Parker Center inert, Harris said. The development could reawaken the Civic Center and create a place that is “extraordinarily useful to the public,” he said, noting that a connection to Little Tokyo is a good start.

The proposal comes as three other major Civic Center developments on longtime dilapidated or eyesore sites are underway. The former Hall of Justice is undergoing a $234 million renovation, and the 1925 building at 211 W. Temple St. is slated to reopen next year and house the Sheriff’s Department and the District Attorney’s office. Additionally, construction has begun on a $400 million Federal Courthouse at the southwest corner of First Street and Broadway. The approximately 600,000-square-foot building will replace a huge dirt hole; it is scheduled to open in 2016.

The city has also begun looking at ways to turn a graffiti-scarred plot at First and Broadway, across from City Hall, into a park.

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