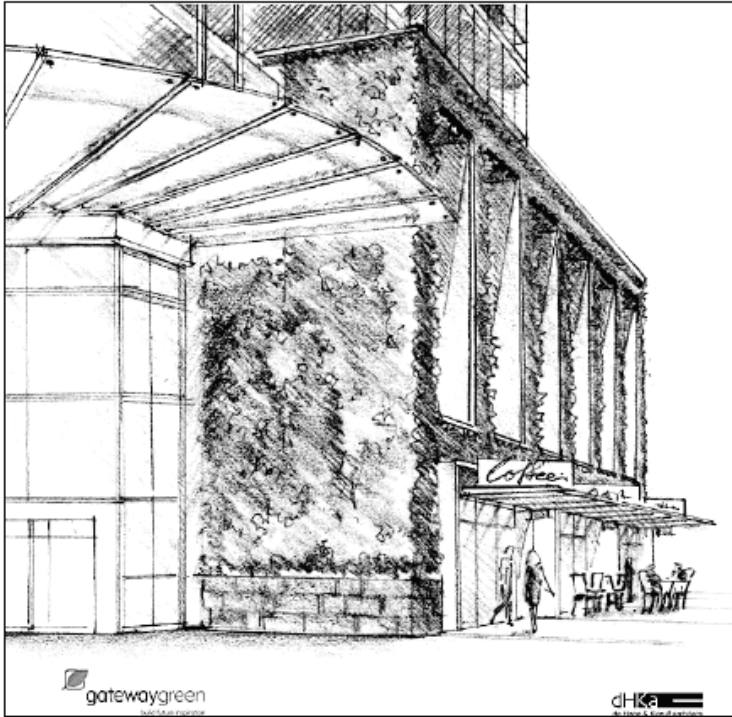


Developer claims three-storey living wall would cut greenhouse gases, artfully



Living wall would cost an estimated \$350,000. *de Hoog & Kierulf Architects*

Times Colonist staff

The age-old question “But is it art?” reared its head at city council this week as a downtown office building was under discussion.

The developer proposing a 15-storey building at Blanshard and Fisgard is offering to install a so-called “living wall” on the bottom three floors of the building facing the street.

The vertical plantings, touted as a way of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, will cost the developer \$350,000 and he’s offering it as his public art contribution.

“I feel uncomfortable that it is being put in the realm of public art when it is part of a green building,” said Coun. Pam Madoff. Her subsequent motion to send the proposal to the city’s public art advisory board for discussion was approved.

Madoff added if a developer put upgraded filials — which are ornate carvings, often of a flowered shape — on his building it would not be considered public art, so why should a green wall qualify.

Even without seeing the green wall proposal, Bill Porteous, a member of the city public art advisory board, is unequivocal that a green wall on a privately owned building is not public art.

Which isn’t to say Porteous doesn’t like the idea or have professional respect for the artist, Xane St. Phillip, who is named as a consultant to the landscape architect doing the project.

But Porteous said public art is on public land and, according to city policy, is chosen using an open competition. It is not the unilateral right of a developer to pick the artist for a public art project.

The green wall on the Gateway building “is not on public land and I think that’s where we have to start with the distinction.”

It’s commonplace for developers to offer amenities in exchange for variances to what kind of building might be allowed on a site under the local government rules. Most common is developers asking to build a bigger building than rules allow as this improves the building’s profitability.

Amenities offered range widely and can include money contributions to affordable housing funds, park space within a project, fire trucks and public art.

Gateway Green Developments wants its building to be 15 metres over the height currently allowed. As well, it would cover more of the lot than the zoning currently allows.

In exchange, it’s offering to put a \$300,000 mid-block walkway through the project, will install purple glass tiles in the sidewalks which will be backlit with LED lights to re-create a historic look of Victoria sidewalks, contribute \$100,000 to the city’s housing trust fund and add a \$150,000 green roof and the living wall.

The developer has named Xane St. Phillip, an art and design consultant, to advise the landscape architect on plant selection for colour and texture.

“I have great respect for Xane St. Phillip as an artist but I’ve never seen him do planting as an artist,” Porteous said.

“In regards to an artist coming in after the fact and working with a developer’s landscape architect and selecting plants, is a car art because an artist chose the colour of the car? It may be art if the artist came up with the conception of a living wall.

“His heart is in the right place. He likely wants to have an impact on the space. I don’t have any problems with the artist they chose, but my question would be using the idea of public art to pass that off as some kind of contribution to the city when it is not on public land and there is no public process,” said Porteous.

St. Phillip, who has his master of fine arts from the University of Victoria and who is active in the North Park Neighbourhood Association, could not be reached for comment.