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On the screen: It's a bird! Or is it Bob?

Arts committee backs video islands to enliven the Sprint Center site

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Kansas Citians soon may be flying, like two-dimensional Wallendas, across 10-foot video screens near the Sprint Center.

On Friday a special arts committee recommended a \$1.3 million commission for New York artist Chris Doyle to install three "islands" outside the downtown arena. Each island would include an oval video screen, surrounded by native trees and water displays.

The screens would be filled with videotaped images, played throughout a 24-hour cycle. In his proposal earlier this month, Doyle suggested those images would be Kansas Citians in flight from screen to screen.

"I'm thrilled and excited. It's a fantastic project," Doyle said in a telephone interview. "I've been spending a little time there, and Kansas City is an amazing city. So much is happening and changing, particularly downtown."

Doyle's design outpolled a submission from New York artist Dennis Oppenheim, who suggested a series of sculptures around the arena, including a 75-foot aluminum marriage of a basketball net and tornado he called the "vortex."

The vote was 7-2.

"We're getting the best of Chris Doyle," committee member Stacy Switzer said. "He's really excited and really inspired. I didn't sense that from Dennis."

University of Kansas assistant professor Yoonmi Nam agreed. "Chris' work would make me stop," she told fellow committee members.

Other members said they were disappointed with both designs. "I didn't get the 'wow' factor on either proposal," said Karen Holland, chairwoman of the Municipal Art

Commission.

Some committee members wondered whether the Doyle design could be altered, either with new videos, changes in the display technology, or both.

“I’ve never seen a public art project go from point A to point B without adaptation,” said Porter Arneill, the city’s public arts administrator. On the other hand, “this is a piece of art,” he said. “We can’t invade his work.”

Doyle said he’s willing to talk and may decide to change the video images of flying people. “That’s something that is evolving since I made that proposal,” he said. “I’m researching that now. It isn’t set in stone.”

At the same time, Doyle said, he wants to maintain the basic project approved by the committee.

“There’ll be refinements and revisions,” he said. “But it all comes back to the core concept.”

The video screens would use light-emitting diode technology to display an image. Committee members said the technique is now in use on billboards and office buildings across the city and the country, and some were worried about observers confusing the two.

But Arneill said LEDs and video displays were popular for a reason. “It’s the flavor of our culture today,” he told the committee.

The committee’s endorsement now goes to the Municipal Art Commission, which will work with Doyle on a final design. The City Council must agree to a contract before the work is built.

The project is part of the city’s 1 percent for art program, in which 1 percent of a public building project’s design and construction budget is set aside for public art. A different committee is considering public art for the Power and Light entertainment district project.

Mark Faber, a representative from the Anschutz Entertainment Group, attended Friday’s meeting. Anschutz, which will run the new arena, did not formally endorse either plan, but Faber appeared to lean toward the Doyle design.

Faber told the committee: “Kansas City is more than tornados and the Wizard of Oz and a cowtown.”