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"It's the best time to invest in Michigan."

— Dan Elsea, President, Brokerage Services



File photo by Deb Jacques

On March 24, the Ferndale City Council approved the final design of a 30-foot-tall Woodward Avenue tribute. The tower will be located in the median on Woodward Avenue, just north of Cambourne Street. Construction is already under way offsite and is expected to be completed by September.

City Council approves tribute design

By Jeremy Selweski
C & G Staff Writer

FERNDALE — After months of deliberation, planning and tweaking, it's official: This year, Ferndale will become the first city to host a 30-foot-tall tower in honor of Woodward Avenue.

On March 24, the City Council unanimously approved the design proposed by the Woodward Avenue Action Association to construct the first of 27 tribute monuments along Woodward from Detroit to Pontiac. The tower will be constructed in the median on Woodward, just north of Cambourne Street, and could be completed as early as September.

"I think this will be a really good addition to the city," said Councilman Scott Galloway. "A lot of folks tend to discount the value of public art, but my view is that it's a primary means of enhancing business development and quality of life."

Following the council's approval of a \$30,000 grant to the WA3 on Nov. 26 to begin the \$167,000 construction project, the only stipulation was that the WA3 create a design that met the council's approval. Fortunately, both sides were happy with the final product.

"The design looks fantastic," said Councilwoman Kate Baker at the March 24 meeting.



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"Now we have a much stronger design," said Debbie Schutt, Woodward Avenue Byway Coordinator for the WA3.

The monument itself, Schutt said, is essentially a 30-foot totem pole. It has a 5-foot cylindrical concrete base embossed with the words "Woodward Avenue," as well as four 6-foot cylindrical glass panels stacked vertically on top of the base.

Each panel will display images of metro Detroit landmarks located along Woodward, including the Detroit Institute of Art, the Detroit Zoo, the Highland Park Ford Model T plant and the Cranbrook Institute of Science. Every picture also features prominent images of automobiles to promote Woodward's status as a National Scenic Byway.

The tower has a solar component at the top that will allow the translucent glass panels to be illuminated at night. But as Galloway pointed out, the illumination will be more of a soft glow than a blinding light.

"It's a very low level of lighting," he said. "It's not going to be lit really boldly, not in a distracting way, but it will be bright enough to see the images."

Schutt said she is feeling "pretty darn excited" that things have finally gotten under way and is looking forward to seeing the finished monument, which is expected to take at least 16 weeks to build.

However, the whole project almost never got off the ground. Following the rejection of the first two design proposals, Schutt said, everything seemed to come to a halt for a while.

The first design contained a cruising theme that the council voted against back in November. The second, Galloway's idea, depicted the history of labor in metro Detroit, but unfortunately, "didn't work out artistically," as Galloway put it.

The problem was finding attractive labor-related images for the tower's tall, narrow panels. "We decided that wasn't what we wanted," Schutt said. "We liked the concept, but we didn't like the visual. With these vertical slices, it was difficult to make the images fit."

It reached the point where Galloway and Councilwoman Tomiko Gumbleton — who worked with the WA3 to redesign the tower — were ready to scrap the entire project. But one day out of the blue, Galloway had what City Manager Bob Bruner called "an epiphany."

"Tomiko and I were ready to pull the plug on this," Galloway said, "but one day I was looking at one of the WA3's posters and really liked the design. I said, 'Why not just wrap this design around the totem?'"

Inspired by Galloway's proposal, the WA3 got to work creating what became the final design, and the city has been more than pleased with the results.

"It was the kind of imagery we were hoping to get," Bruner said. "The city embraces public art, and this is a good marriage between Ferndale and the WA3."

For Bruner, it's a relief that the hardest part of the process is behind them now. "The design process took some twists and turns for sure," he said. "It had been sputtering for a while, but I'm glad things are moving forward again."

At the March 24 meeting, Mayor Craig Covey praised the patience of both the city and the WA3 in waiting until they came up with a proposal that was satisfying for everyone.

"I'm glad we didn't just jump into the first design on the table," he said.

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And the WA3 is glad to be working with the city to help kick off its grand vision. During her presentation to the council, Schutt said she was happy that the first of the Woodward tributes would be constructed in Ferndale, calling it "the sweet spot" of metro Detroit.

"We could have told you that," Covey replied playfully.

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