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What's Next for Parker Center?

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Officials Say Dilapidated Police Headquarters Could Sit Vacant for Several Years

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Published: Friday, October 16, 2009 4:17 PM PDT

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - The Civic Center has a new gem in the \$440 million police headquarters building on First between Main and Spring streets. But as the Los Angeles Police Department preps for the Oct. 24 opening of the new digs, questions remain over what to do with its old home, Parker Center.

The answer to those questions may not come any time soon. Although city officials have known for years the property would be empty, only now are they working to hire a firm to conduct the necessary environmental studies.

In the coming weeks, the city Board of Public Works is expected to approve a contract with consultant Tetra Design to perform an Environmental Impact Report on the 1955 building, which many city and civic officials have long derided as dilapidated. The city council has set aside \$1 million for the study, which is required because the edifice has been found to be eligible for state and national historical designations.

The proposed study comes more than three years after the council directed city agencies to evaluate the feasibility of demolishing the building and constructing a new city facility. Since then, it's been a common expectation that Parker Center would be razed as soon as the LAPD finalized its move into the gleaming new headquarters a block away.

Parker Center was built for \$6.1 million, according to the LAPD (it was named for Chief William H. Parker after he died in 1966). In the first few years after it opened, there was so much demand from public and civic groups for tours that the department staffed a full-time officer as a tour guide.

Now, as the department moves from Parker Center into the new building, it's difficult to imagine visitors oohing and ahing at the 54-year-old facility at First and Los Angeles streets. These days, they'd be more likely to question its safety.

"It's shameful that we would force the police administration to have to live in that building when it has been so clearly, in my view, unsafe," said Carol Schatz, president and CEO of the Central City Association, echoing a viewpoint others in Downtown have made for years.

Even outgoing LAPD Chief William Bratton recently joked at a media event inside the new headquarters that a Hollywood production company should buy Parker Center, just so they could blow it up.

Not so fast, said Ninth District Councilwoman Jan Perry.

"It's very easy to say, 'Let's tear it down,' but I think we need to be responsible about it and go



Parker Center, which the LAPD is vacating for a new headquarters a block away, has long been considered for demolition. A proposed study could recommend adaptive reuse instead. *Photo by Gary Leonard.*

through a process and document that it cannot be revived in any way before we draw that conclusion," Perry said.

Civic Center Blight

In addition to evaluating the structural integrity of Parker Center, the EIR would analyze the feasibility of alternative options for the site.

A report by the city's Municipal Services Committee on the proposed EIR identifies five options, including adaptive reuse of the building, partial demolition and renovation, and demolition and replacement with a temporary parking lot. The other options would be to demolish the building and replace it with a 1 million-square-foot structure and 500 parking spaces, or the same plan but with 1,000 parking spaces.

It may not be the most glamorous option, but finding an adaptive reuse for the structure could be the most environmentally friendly route.

"All the people that say 'Hey, just tear it down, they don't understand the embodied energy that goes into doing something like that, not to mention the resources and taxpayer money that would go into rebuilding a structure in a Downtown environment," said Michael Schulman, an associate principal with the architecture firm Johnson Favaro, which has designed several civic facilities in Los Angeles. "It probably needs to be brought to current structural code, but as far as a good skeleton... it's already there."

No matter what happens to the site, it won't be happening soon. Perry noted that environmental analyses can take several years. The Municipal Services Committee report indicates that the proposed consultant would initiate the study in December and finish it in June 2011.

"I think any sort of development is utterly dependent on the ability to generate funds or revenue to develop it, and in a down real estate market we will probably have to be realistic and slow our progress. But we can still move forward in making plans for the future," Perry said.

In the meantime, Parker Center will continue to host limited LAPD operations, including a jail which occupies 72,000 square feet in the 325,000-square-foot building, and its Scientific Investigation Division, said Reginald Jones Sawyer, chief management analyst for the city.

Most of the building, however, will be left vacant, potentially adding to the Civic Center's patchwork of abandoned public properties.

In the shadow of celebrated structures like City Hall, Walt Disney Concert Hall and the Caltrans buildings, there are at least three wallowing publicly owned sites. The property immediately west of City Hall is a former office tower that was razed after it suffered earthquake damage, and is now a fenced-off, graffiti-scarred plot.

A block away is the massive hole at First Street and Broadway, where the federal government planned to build a new courthouse until funding issues crippled progress. The earthquake-damaged County Hall of Justice, at Temple Street between Spring Street and Broadway, has been shuttered for years.

The layout does mark significant progress since 1997, however, when a coalition of city, state and federal agencies, along with the local business community, convened the Civic Center Authority and worked on a master plan for the area. It was known as the 10-Minute Diamond Plan because it sought to concentrate government offices within a 10-minute walk from City Hall. The state-sanctioned authority still exists, but meetings eventually "just sort of fizzled out," Schatz said.

With the pending status of Parker Center, some suggest reconvening the authority.

"It might be time to revisit the Diamond Plan and bring back the parties that participated," said Dan Rosenfeld, planning deputy to L.A. County Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas. Rosenfeld was a member of the group when he worked in the private sector. "It would be unfortunate if any one government made unilateral real estate decisions, without discussing it with everyone. We're all

neighbors there."

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