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DAN VOELPEL

Tacoma, WA - August 25, 2005

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Face-lift face-off

Two development companies offer differing proposals on how to fix downtown Tacoma's Park Plaza garages

DAN VOELPEL; THE NEWS TRIBUNE
 Published: July 31st, 2005 12:01 AM



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When movie titans Godzilla and King Kong battled in 1962, it meant bad news and destruction for downtown Tokyo.

Now a pair of titans in the Puget Sound region's development world will battle for the right to rid downtown Tacoma of two hideous monsters – the parking garages known as Park Plaza North and Park Plaza South.

In this case, however, the outcome will mean good news and prosperity for downtown Tacoma.

Earlier this year, Tacoma's asset management division issued a call for proposals from anyone willing to do something – anything, really – to make over its two parking garages.

Tacoma got back two distinctive yet dissimilar proposals.

One scheme, from Pacific Plaza Development LLC, would do what the city asked: Start with the existing garage shells, reinforce them, then build up and around them.

The other concept, from Simon Johnson LLC, would wipe away the garages altogether and start over with a clean canvas.

Pacific Plaza Development would add 266 more parking stalls, stack two floors of office space atop each garage and install retail shops on both Pacific Avenue and Commerce Street.

Simon Johnson would add roughly a little more office and a little less retail space but throw in 1,186 more parking stalls and 110 residential units.

Pull up a chair, my friends. The battle is on.

Partners in the Pacific Plaza Development proposal would occupy half of the office space and suggest the city's Environmental Services offices take the rest. The city tentatively plans to build a new Environmental Services office building next to its landfill on the border with Fircrest but could shift those workers downtown.



[🔍 Enlarge image](#)

ARCHITECTS BCRA, TACOMA

The proposal from Simon Johnson LLC would demolish both Park Plaza parking garages and start with new construction. The plan would add residential units, office space, ground-level retail space and public plazas, in addition to 1,186 parking spaces.

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“The Environmental Services building would better serve the citizens of Tacoma by being downtown and help spur economic development,” said Dan Putnam, co-owner of Pacific Plaza Development. “I feel our proposal is a viable proposal that can be done now.”

“We believe this development could spur something larger in downtown.”



[Enlarge image](#)

BLRB ARCHITECTS, TACOMA

The proposal from Pacific Plaza Development LLC would renovate the Park Plaza North and Park Plaza South parking garages on Pacific Avenue. The plan would add new shells, one floor of parking and two floors of office space.

Meanwhile, Herb Simon of Simon Johnson said his proposal isn't a simple catalyst for something larger. It is the something larger – once his team demolishes the two parking garages.

“We shouldn't be looking at the future of downtown Tacoma as planning on a minor scale,” Simon said. “We should be looking on a macro scale. Putting a bandage on those garages isn't looking out for the future of Tacoma. ... Bandages won't grow our community.”

While Pacific Plaza Development has tenants in mind to take the space, Simon acknowledged his proposal contains more “speculative” development in it.

“We can develop the magnitude based on market demand,” he said. “In Tacoma, we just can't afford to lose this opportunity.”

Rick Brush, the city's asset manager, said he needs more financial information from both partnerships to clarify how much of their own money they'll invest versus how much they expect City Hall to provide.

“They are robust proposals, and it's not perfectly certain either one will make it through the evaluation process,” Brush said. “It's not that they're defective or not good quality submissions. ... But we could find problems in the city's ability to participate at the level the developers are proposing.”

Last fall, following a consultant's suggestion, the City Council discussed a mini-makeover of the existing parking garages – kind of like putting makeup on a pig – to spruce up the two drab ugly ducklings. The money would come from a \$4.1 million pool reserved from convention center construction bonds.

After looking at artist renderings of \$1 million cosmetic makeover options, however, council members didn't see anything beautiful enough to kiss up to.

Brush plans to convene a selection committee made up of downtown business and chamber of commerce representatives and city staff members from several departments. A recommendation to the City Council could come as early as September.

The city and residents have a distinct choice to make, said Tom Absher, co-partner in Pacific Plaza Development and executive vice president of Absher Construction Co.

“It's not like, ‘Gee, these are so alike, which one do you choose?’” Absher said. “They're totally different. It's great for the city to have those options (between) two solid competitors.”

Kind of like Godzilla vs. King Kong.

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Pacific Plaza Development LLC

The team:

General contractor: Absher Construction Co., Puyallup

Structural engineer: Putnam Collins Scott Associates Inc., Tacoma

Designer: BLRB Architects, Tacoma

Lender: Columbia Bank, Tacoma

Environmental building consultant: Interface Engineering, Portland

Commercial real estate broker: Neil Walter Co., Tacoma

The leaders:

- Dan Putnam, president, Putnam Collins Scott Associates
- Tom Absher, executive vice president, Absher Construction Co.

The proposal:

- Renovate both parking garages with new shells along Pacific Avenue.
- Add one floor of parking, two floors office space at south garage.
- Add one floor of parking, two floors office space at north garage.
- Complete construction in 30 months.

The tenants:

- Developer to occupy portion of south office space.
- Environmental services division of city's public works department to occupy north office space.
- Upgrade all Pacific Avenue retail space.

The finances:

- City to finance construction of additional parking, then own it.
- City to acquire ground level retail space and lease to developer.

The statistics:

- Additional parking: 266 spaces
- Class A office space: 163,000 square feet
- Residential units: none
- Retail space: 91,000 square feet
- Total construction cost: \$68.6 million

- City of Tacoma's share: \$17.9 million for added parking, \$21.9 million for environmental services office building

Other PCSA/Absher projects:

- A Street parking garage, Tacoma
- MultiCare Health System parking garage expansion, Tacoma
- Touchstone office buildings, Kirkland and east King County
- Tacoma Dome Station expansion (Absher only)
- Tacoma Art Museum (PCSA only)

Five questions:

1. Does it make the most sense to remodel the existing parking garages?
2. Will a remake of the garages spur additional private investment downtown?
3. Is it too small – or just practical?
4. Will the city abandon plans for a new office building next to the landfill and move its environmental services employees downtown?
5. Will the upgrades and expanded parking generate enough revenue for the city to recoup its construction contribution and still generate enough to pay off the convention center construction debt for which the parking revenue is already pledged?

Simon Johnson LLC

The team:

Developer: Simon Johnson LLC, Tacoma

Construction contractor: Lease Crutcher Lewis, Seattle

Structural engineer: Sitts & Hill Engineers, Tacoma

Designer: Architects BCRA, Tacoma

Market analyst: The Ryness Co., San Diego

Residential expert: George Pilant, Tacoma

The leaders:

- Herb Simon, partner, Simon Johnson
- Ted Johnson, partner, Simon Johnson

The proposal:

- Demolish both parking garages with all-new construction.
- Add ground-level retail space.
- Add residential units and office space.
- Add public plazas in both buildings.

- Complete construction in phases in 30 months.

The statistics:


- Additional parking: 1,186 spaces, 10 percent more than required
- Class A office space: 176,000 square feet (Park Plaza North only)
- Residential units: 42 units (north), 68 units (south), 150,000 square feet
- Retail space: 74,600 square feet
- Total construction cost: \$ 89.4 million
- City of Tacoma's share: undetermined

Other Simon Johnson projects/ownership:

- Swantown Boatworks, Olympia
- Chamber of Commerce Building, Tacoma
- James Center, Tacoma
- Dock Building, Tacoma
- Foss Harbor (future mixed-use), Tacoma

Five questions:

1. Does it make the most sense to demolish the existing parking garages and start over?
2. Is it too big for the residential and office market to absorb – or is it realistically visionary?
3. Can it draw office tenants as a speculative construction project?
4. How much in financing do the developers want from the City of Tacoma? And can the city afford it?
5. Because the city has pledged parking revenue from the two garages to pay off its convention center debt, can the city afford to lose the revenue during more than two years of construction?

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