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Debating 'The Wow Factor'



Brazilian artist Jose Resende's work would turn shipping containers into sculpture at Westminster Pier Park. Council is divided on whether to approve installation of the piece. — Image Credit:



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by [Grant Granger - New Westminister News Leader](#)
posted Apr 30, 2014 at 10:00 AM

City council has pressed the pause button on a controversial piece of public art described as having 'The Wow Factor.'

But to some councillors it may be a bad 'wow.' And if they decide to dump it they won't get the two art pieces they do like.

They're all part of the Vancouver Biennale's latest initiative for which the city has budgeted \$90,000. Biennale officials told council Monday the three installations are a package deal. They also told council they have a track record that will prove them right in the end.

The fuss is over the vision of Brazilian artist José Resende. [His concept is four](#)

transport containers angled skyward on the Timber Wharf at Westminster Pier Park.

Council likes Blue Trees by Konstantin Dimopolous, which would be on Columbia Street, and a Public Furniture/Urban Trees piece by Hugo Franco. While both will stay in New West for two years the Resende piece will remain as a legacy. Some councillors aren't sure if they even want it brought in let alone become a permanent part of Pier Park.

"It's all or none," Biennale founder Barrie Mowatt told council Monday of the three projects. "You have to buy in to what our vision is ... You have to trust what we're doing is the best we can do to impact the city."

Biennale marketing director Miriam Blume noted A-maze-ing Laughter generated a lot of controversy when it was installed near English Bay in 2009. She called the 14 bronze-painted figures "Vancouver's Eiffel Tower" because it attracts visitors.

"It delivered on the wow factor and the economic factor," said Blume. "We have a reputation and a 10-year track record, so we don't want to blow it. What we're asking you to do is deliver something truly awe inspiring. Yeah, that takes some guts."

Mowatt said the city will be fortunate to have a work from such a strong Brazilian artist.

"Without a doubt ... citizens will be saying wow, what foresight that's pretty spectacular," said Mowatt. "You're sort of catching the beginning of the wave."

Ammar Mahimwalla of Biennale said Resende went with the industrial art vision after looking at the site because "he sees the value in everyday reality. It's to inspire people to think about everyday reality."

That didn't go over well with Mayor Wayne Wright. He said New Westminster's everyday reality is there is "no positiveness whatsoever" in truck containers. They clog the city's streets and their emergence spelled the end of New Westminster as a port.

"I was hoping you'd be a little bit more understanding," said Wright.

The Resende piece is scheduled to be installed in the fall, about the same time the city will unveil its Wait For Me Daddy sculpture near Hyack Square.

"We've taken a huge risk, and anything that could tarnish, that could create a problem around that, I have a great deal of angst about," said Wright. "We have put a lot of our eggs in our basket with the Wait For Me Daddy Memorial ... I'm concerned about what New Westminster citizens see what we're doing with their money."

The wow factor for Coun. Betty McIntosh was different to that of the Biennale officials.

"It almost looks like a train wreck, and that's fearful, and that's not something anyone wants to be here," said McIntosh.

Conversely, the more debate Coun. Jonathan Coté heard the more intrigued he was.

"When art creates discussion it may be a good sign that people are noticing," Coté said the Biennale officials. "Sometimes I think communities need to take a chance and let groups like yourself push a border with public art."

Coun. Jaimie McEvoy and Coun. Lorrie Williams, chair of the Wait For Me Daddy memorial task force, said they wanted to talk to city residents before making a decision.

"It just hasn't grabbed me, and I'm wondering the reaction of our citizens it would make. It's a big commitment," said Williams.

With Coun. Chuck Puchmayr away on council business, a final decision was put off until its next meeting on Monday.

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