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Phoenix ditches $2.4 million public-art project for park

Connie Cone Sexton
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A $2.4 million public art piece chosen by a city-appointed panel for the planned downtown park near Van Buren Street and Central Avenue has been rejected by the Phoenix City Manager's Office despite $104,000 already paid to the artist.

Phoenix Arts and Culture Commission members are angry and wonder if someone in City Hall thinks the proposed piece, which resembles a floating jellyfish, is too unconventional and will reignite a controversy on what makes for proper public art.

Internationally known artist Janet Echelman was chosen by the arts panel in April to create an iconic piece for the 2.77-acre Civic Space, part of the downtown Arizona State University campus. The 100-foot-wide piece, which would be made of diaphanous, flexible nets to move with the wind, would rise about 55 feet above the park attached to three towers, the highest being 160 feet. The design is meant to evoke a cactus flower.

Plans for the art, which have been reviewed in several public meetings earlier this year and were poised to receive the remaining funding by the City Council, were dropped suddenly last week by Ed Zuercher, Phoenix deputy city manager. The project, which he said involves complex engineering to install the work's steel beams, could delay the November opening of the park by three to nine months. That's news to Civic Space's general contractor Todd MacDuffie, who said Friday afternoon that no one from the city had talked to him about canceling the project.

It was also news to the artist, who said she had been working closely with the contractor and the architect on installation configurations. Echelman said no official has asked her if the art could be installed sooner.

'Not a lot of return'

Zuercher, who recently began his job after serving three years as Mayor Phil Gordon's chief of staff, said Friday he won't ask the council to authorize the remaining money for Echelman's work. City officials will have to start

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