

September 22, 2025

Dear Commissioners,

I want to take this opportunity to reaffirm my commitment to advancing a shared vision for the Cultural Affairs Division. Our work is most effective when it is grounded in collaboration, transparency, and mutual trust.

Project Summary: MGM Sign and Arts District Tree Surrounds

Two items continue to require thoughtful review by the Commission: the MGM sign and the Arts District tree surrounds. Both projects raise questions about whether they should be considered through a historic preservation lens or as public art. In both cases, historic designation may provide significant protections but could also limit flexibility, extend approval timelines, and require clarification of funding sources. Public art pathways may provide more flexibility and access to Cultural Trust funding but would not provide the same level of historic protection.

Staff will be consulting with Architectural Resources Group (ARG) on both projects so that the Commission and the soon-to-be-established Historic Preservation Subcommittee have the technical information necessary to make informed choices.

Historic Preservation Subcommittee Timing

The delay in establishing the Historic Preservation Subcommittee was intentional as mentioned in [July](#) (time stamp approx. 1:02 min). Staff sought first to finalize a contract with ARG and clarify funding sources in consultation with the Finance Department and the City Manager's Office. Historic preservation work was not funded in last year's budget, and this year's General Fund resources are very limited due to the fiscal deficit. As such, the General Fund is not anticipated to be a primary source of support for most Cultural Affairs projects and programs.

ARG has also recommended that the City's municipal code for historic preservation be updated as a first step for any major historic preservation planning work we want to embark on, to ensure compliance with present-day standards. This recommendation was included in the Cultural Affairs Division's [work plan presentation](#) (time stamp

approx. 37 minutes) to both the Commission and the City Council, establishing it as a shared priority. The subcommittee may play an important role in advancing this update.

So far this fiscal year, our Division work has included launching brand new Public Art programs, onboarding the City's first Artist Laureate, and beginning the Community Cultural Equity Plan along with a busy mix of other regular duties. To ensure this workload is managed responsibly, staff prioritized foundational steps before moving into historic preservation planning.

MGM Sign Follow-Up

Over the past several months, Cultural Affairs has worked closely with the City Manager's Office, Economic Development, and PRCS to identify a suitable site for the MGM sign that meets several priorities: visibility, public safety, minimizing opportunities for climbing, and ensuring the sign does not obstruct businesses or public gathering places. These criteria previously ruled out many potential downtown locations, including around the Culver Steps.

Given ongoing concerns, staff will again engage these departments to see if additional potential locations may be identified.

At the recent [Public Art Subcommittee meeting](#) (time stamp 1:00 for this conversation), much of the discussion focused on the importance of providing clear renderings of the sign in its potential location so that the full Commission can evaluate the project appropriately. My review of the meeting recording reflects that much of the feedback focused on overall support for the project and for the work of the Division. To ensure the record is complete, I am including additional clarification on siting considerations in this follow-up and within the linked recording.

The Commission has also expressed concern that the sign may have been miscategorized as a public art project rather than as a potential historic preservation project. To address this directly, staff has postponed scheduled discussions with the Senior Center and PRCS Commission until a staff report can be prepared that clearly outlines both pathways:

- Historic preservation donation: no alterations permitted; CEQA and other reviews may be required; funding sources would need to be clarified in consultation with the Finance Department and the City Manager's Office, given that General Fund resources are very limited this year.

- Public art donation: Cultural Trust funding may be available; this approach could provide more flexibility for acquisition, maintenance, and oversight; it may also avoid the extended timelines of historic designation.

ARG will provide guidance to help the Commission weigh both approaches with full and accurate information.

Tree Surrounds Follow-Up

Staff presented the Arts District tree surrounds as part of the Division's work plan at the [February](#) (time stamp approx. 49 min) and [May](#) (time stamp approx. 43 minutes) 2025 Commission meetings, including mention of the City Council's direction to the Division.

At the August CAC meeting, I did not reference the tree surrounds conversation or the community feedback session. Although I confirmed that the topic came up at the [August 25 Public Art Subcommittee](#) (time stamp of 1:11 for this conversation), I reviewed my emails with Jeff Morrical and realized that the September 14 community session was not fully confirmed in time for the August 19 Commission meeting. As a result, I had inadvertently left the topic off my staff updates at the end of that meeting. I provide this clarification here for the record.

The public survey on the tree surrounds has already been launched, and staff will continue to circulate it and promote participation. Outreach includes GovDelivery e-blasts, social media posts, and QR-code posters linking to the survey at the Art Walk on October 18 to encourage broad community engagement.

As with the MGM sign, the tree surrounds raise questions about whether historic preservation or public art may be the more appropriate path. Historic designation may limit flexibility for alterations or restoration and extend approval timelines. While public art designation could offer greater adaptability, initial research suggests that this option may not be possible under the current criteria in the municipal code, as the surrounds were not originally conceived as artworks and were designed primarily as functional streetscape elements. If there is a viable path to address these code limitations, staff will explore those options for the Commission to consider. Reinterpretation is also a possibility and will be included in the forthcoming staff report, along with relevant survey feedback, to ensure the Commission has a complete picture of available approaches.

Communications Follow-Up

The Communications Subcommittee will meet later this year (November or December) to develop a shared framework for arts communications. This will include clarifying distinctions between press releases, GovDelivery messages, and social media pushes, and creating alignment on how best to highlight the Commission's work in public-facing communications.

As staff continues to deliver on the adopted work plan, I look forward to the Commission's continued collaboration. Advance notice of questions or concerns is always helpful, as it allows staff to prepare the most complete responses for public meetings.

Thank you for your partnership and dedication to Culver City's cultural life.

Sincerely,
Sally Unsworth
Cultural Affairs Manager