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**Equity Factor**


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# No, These Ugly LED Statues Will Not Revolutionize the Streets of Philadelphia

BY **BILL BRADLEY** | APRIL 9, 2014

**H**ere is a terrible idea for economic development, and a sterling example of how hyperbole rules the day when we talk about civic projects: Giant interactive LED displays that tell you the weather and news. What most people might mistake for the outside of *The Today Show* set in Times Square is now being proposed as legislation in Philadelphia for a new “digital district” in Center City.

Catalyst Outdoor — it’s not based in Silicon Valley, we checked — is the company behind what it calls Urban Experiential Displays (UED), or giant 3D statues, that it hopes to build Center City with easy installments of \$2 million each. “A communication revolution is taking place in Philadelphia, one that will generate millions of dollars for the city,” the company said [in a press release](#) without a hint of irony. It then explains why the city should designate a district around City Hall where building UEDs is permitted.

Catalyst, who did not return a call for comment, said that the UEDs — “the first of their kind in North America” — would generate \$54 million for the city over roughly 20 years in tax revenue, licensing fees and permit fees. It proposes seven locations for the UED displays, which could take on such bulbous Disneyesque shapes as an hourglass, globe or random musical notes on a piece of billowing staff paper. (You can tell it’s a theater, see, because of the eighth notes.) Thirty percent of the UEDs display time will be non-advertising, which Catalyst says “most of which is dedicated to the city and local non-profits.”

That means the UEDs, when they’re not hawking products for Nike and Verizon, could give traffic and weather updates to Philadelphians who are already on the streets outside. (Also, dig the way the press release refers to advertising as “original local content.”)

How a city with a median household income of \$37,016, 22.1 percent of households on SNAP and 21 percent of families living below the poverty level can justify spending \$2 million a pop on glorified

billboards LED light installations is lost on me. It isn't a job generator, that's for certain. And while it could modestly increase the tax revenue via ad sales, I hardly qualify that as economic development. As our associate editor Matt Bevilacqua [put it](#), "late-'90s Times Square-style kitsch is what passes for smart economic development in Philly?"

Even the back-of-the-envelope math doesn't make much sense. Seven UEDs at \$2 million each comes out to \$14 million, and Catalyst only promises the city \$54 million — so, a \$40 million net gain — over 20 years. Even if the projections are accurate, \$2 million per year is not that much revenue.

The legislation hasn't been introduced to City Council yet, but [according to the Philadelphia Business Journal](#) "is expected to eventually reach its chambers." In the meantime, it seems like Catalyst is scouting out areas near that [neighborhood-changing paintbrush](#).

*The Equity Factor is made possible with the support of the Surdna Foundation.*

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