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LOCAL

Arts play a big role in vision for Springfield's future

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The city of Springfield's downtown and most visited attractions such as Bass Pro Shops, Wonders of Wildlife and the Springfield Art Museum are re-imagined to be more connected and accessible for locals and tourists in the city's future plans.

Springfield's director of quality of place initiatives, Tim Rosenbury, said plans for the city in the coming years include the construction of a bike and pedestrian corridor along Grant Avenue.

The pandemic has made connection an immediate issue because many jobs remain virtual, so people now have fluidity to choose where they live. Cities that already have centralized and accessible spaces are now becoming popular destination cities such as Bentonville, Arkansas, and Colorado Springs, Colorado.

"We have plenty of places in Springfield," Rosenbury said. "If you think about our numerous college campuses, we have a lot of parks, libraries, and places to shop. We have two historic urban districts: Commercial Street and the historic downtown. So we have many places, but what we don't do well in Springfield is we don't connect the places we have. We need to create synergies among them, and that's what we are trying to do here with open space."

The Grant Avenue Parkway corridor development will allow families to bike from the Wonders of Wildlife to the Springfield Art Museum or one of the city's parks such as Phelps Grove, Doling Park and even share a meal at a local eatery downtown.

The new trail system gives Springfield, the most populated city in southwest Missouri, an identity that even in urban areas the outdoors are everywhere.

This key identifier, nature, connects the city with the beautiful geography of the Ozarks

and authentically makes the city stand out from the 33 other Springfields in the United States.

City planning experts say connection requires more than just accessible travel from north to south sides of the city. Stronger connection happens by the focus on quality of place. By bringing art to the corridor, synergies can be created between nature and human expression.

“Art is iconographic, and I think great cities and great places are loaded with iconographies that are specific and speak to the character and value of that place,” Rosenbury said. “That’s what good art should do, even if there may not be a total synchrony between what we are as a city and the sculpture, it’s the fact that it’s memorable.”

Sculpture expansion aims to increase unity

Sculpture Walk Springfield first brought sculptures to Springfield in 2016. Now more than 30 pieces are exhibited throughout downtown and Jordan Valley Park. The sculptures are rotated annually, producing a fresh and must-see experience.

The Sculpture Walk is acclaimed as one of the best in the Midwest and more comprehensive than other cities similar in size to Springfield.

The long-term goal of the walk has been to expand to have sculptures beyond just downtown. The council’s partnership will make this happen by including meaningful life-size sculptures on the new corridor.

Art programming gives back to community

With its future plans, Springfield is out to show that creative programming and planning can create equity in urban areas. Springfield hopes that art will be a way to improve neighborhoods without creating a situation where the folks currently living there are out-priced, like has happened in other cities.

“I love how it’s so nurturing here to help establish artists who are just starting out on the local level to help launch their careers,” Dana Bridges, a ceramic artist at Fresh Gallery, said. “It’s just very important to me that I do have a voice here. And I also see this place as dynamic.”

In 2013, the city rezoned the community neighboring Commercial Street allowing artists to create and sell their work all under one roof. The 10-block district, spanning from North Broadway Avenue to North Washington Avenue connects Springfield creatives with one of the most poverty-stricken areas. Moon City is home to graphic designers, painters, ceramic and 3D artists. It's distinctly marked by colorful yarn-bombed or painted telephone poles and serves as an immersive art experience for creatives and resounding neighbors. The live-work zoning makes creative careers more attainable by offering housing at affordable prices and eliminating separate payment for studio and living areas.

The Commercial Street footbridge has been closed for several years, but advocates say reopening the bridge could easily increase connection between the Commercial Street farmers market goers and Moon City art sellers.

Quality of place benefits Springfield Art Museum

Major changes are coming for the Springfield Art Museum with its 30-year master plan. Construction is already underway with the creation of natural bed culverts to mitigate flooding and introduce wildlife to the museum grounds. Similarly to the city, the museum is focusing on quality of place by integrating and activating spaces. The plans include outdoor greenspace that connects to Phelps Grove Park and the demolition and replacement of the museum's existing education wing.

The museum's goal is to increase visibility for locals.

"We try to reach as many people as possible, which is a difficult stretch," said Joshua Best, Springfield Art Museum officer of audience development. "Pre-pandemic we were serving 63,000 people a year, and that's a mix of locals, people who are in Springfield for other tourist purposes, and surrounding communities. We provide our services to Springfield, but we also provide services to 32 rural school districts that surround us."

Arts education teaches important lesson

A principal subject in school is visual and performing arts, but the Springfield Regional Arts Council (SRAC) believes 60 minutes of art class during the school day isn't enough exposure for children. The SRAC provides resources for teachers about how art can be included in any classroom regardless of the subject matter.

Proponents say this programming teaches students to think critically and creatively.

Just as the housing initiatives for creatives close gaps in economic obstacles, the SRAC removes financial barriers for art education as well.

“Our plans usually evolve around arts education, particularly for kindergarten through grade eight students, specifically students who are considered at-risk or don't have access to the arts to make sure there's equity to access in arts education for all students,” Leslie Forrester, director of the SRAC said.

This advocacy links local artists with students by incorporating art into spaces children interact everyday, including the Boys and Girls Club, Harmony House and Springfield Public Schools.

“The bulk of the funding that we get goes to pay the teaching artists, and that's an important part of what we do,” Forrester said. “We're modeling for the rest of the community about why arts are a valuable piece and should be paid for, just like paying for a musician to come play.”