

Arts District Proposal Approved by City of Frostburg--Now Goes to State

Written by Richard Kerns

Thursday, 11 September 2008 12:02 - Last Updated Saturday, 20 September 2008 21:52



FROSTBURG – The city of Frostburg fully supports efforts to establish an Arts & Entertainment District in the community, with city officials confident that the state will approve the designation by the end of the year.

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“It’s 5-0 in favor,” City Administrator John Kirby said of the mayor and council’s support for what he described as the “grassroots effort” to develop the district.

Kirby attributed the idea for the district to local residents, including faculty and staff from Frostburg State University, city council member Susan Keller, local business people and artists who already call Frostburg home.

Keller said the arts district was a natural outgrowth of long-standing efforts to revitalize the downtown Main Street area and foster economic development in the community as a whole. “I think people are interested in trying to figure out ways to promote the city and showcase those things we already have,” Keller said. “This interest seemed to go hand-in-hand with an arts and entertainment district.”

Also instrumental in spearheading the proposal was the Cumberland-based Allegany Arts Council (alleganyartscouncil.org), through its director, Andy Vick.

An arts and entertainment district seeks to foster growth of cultural attractions, primarily through tax incentives that attract artists and arts-related businesses by reducing the tax burden on such

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enterprises. The state would also provide the district an exemption to the admissions and amusement tax, as well as income tax reductions for artists.

Vick, who has energetically guided the Allegany Arts Council during his five-year tenure at its helm, was instrumental in winning approval for Cumberland's A&E District six years ago, and oversees the district's continuing development. Only 17 such districts exist in the state of Maryland, he noted, and applications are competitive.

More than just a financial spur to arts development, Vick said an arts district is a valuable marketing tool. It tells artists looking to plant roots someplace cool and breezy – and Frostburg is nothing, if not that – that the community cares about the arts and welcomes artists and arts-related enterprises. “It speaks to the value they place on the arts,” he said of communities that establish arts districts, “as well as the realization that the arts can have a positive, meaningful impact on the community.”

The joint effort with the Arts Council demonstrates the cooperative spirit of not only the arts, but larger economic development efforts in Western Maryland. Keller said dual arts districts in Cumberland and Frostburg would strengthen the region's cultural appeal, while recognizing that the two communities offer distinct attractions.

“We really have a uniqueness that Cumberland doesn't have, and Cumberland has its own qualities,” Keller said.

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While the city council has already established the district itself, the tax incentives must be approved by the state, through the Department of Business and Economic Development

According to the city's application, much of the proposed Arts and Entertainment District overlaps the city's existing Historic District and Enterprise Zone. Working with its two formal partners, the Allegany Arts Council and Frostburg's Main Street program, the city submitted a 26-page application making its case for the A&E District.

Kirby said an arts district does not seek to establish an arts tradition in a community, but rather to "enhance what's already there."

In the case of Frostburg, the arts scene is rooted heavily in Frostburg State University, with its annual Cultural Events Series that draws internationally recognized performing artists. This year's lineup includes Kathy Mattea, the Maryland Symphony Orchestra, and off-Broadway musicals. For more information, visit the Web site ces.frostburg.edu .

Frostburg State also promotes what Kirby called "indigenous art" through the Appalachian Festival, being held next weekend at the university, with a Saturday-evening performance at the Main Street Palace Theatre by Robin and Linda Williams and their Fine Group, who have appeared on "A Prairie Home Companion," "The American Radio Company," "Austin City Limits," and "The Grand Old Opry."

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Beyond FSU, the Arts & Entertainment District will build on home-grown arts attractions like the Palace Theatre (<http://www.frostburgpalace.org/>), the Main Street Books reading club, and the General Arts Store, as well as numerous businesses, churches and other venues that feature galleries or host art exhibits.

Keller said a critical inclusion in the district is the Frostburg Museum (<http://frostmuseum.allconet.org/>), which houses a vast collection of local history, and is currently undergoing a rejuvenation with new board leadership and “a ton of volunteers.”

Such efforts pre-date the arts district proposal, and in fact helped inspire the movement to establish the district. “All of a sudden you realize in our community, there’s a tremendous amount of arts activity already going on,” Kirby said. “All of this has happened regardless of what’s going on with the district.”

Support for the arts district was demonstrated at an Aug. 21 public hearing. “There was a tremendous turnout,” Keller said. “There was full support from the community.”

In addition to the Maryland Dept. of Business and Economic Development, the application for an Arts & Entertainment District must be approved by the Maryland State Arts Council. The city will also seek approval from the Allegany County Commissioners.

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The application process is competitive, and the state does not rubber-stamp new arts districts, but city officials are confident that the strength of Frostburg's application will result in approval. Kirby says, "When you see some of the unique aspects in the community, including Frostburg State, I think that really strengthens the application. We're all very optimistic."

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