

City studying ways to save mural

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The big mural has been enchanting children of all ages at the Madison Central Library for 45 years.

Now, the city is exploring if, and how, it can preserve the 75-foot-long painting by noted artist Aaron Bohrod when the library is demolished and replaced with a new \$37 million facility.

The challenge is that the mural is painted directly onto a structural wall in the second-floor children's library, meaning the wall would have to be disassembled and removed in sections or become part of a redevelopment of the current library site.

"It's so wonderful and fairy-like and whimsical - perfect for a children's library," said art conservator Tony Rajert, who the city has tapped to study options for the mural. "I would hope some way, somehow, the mural can be saved."

The mural, which features a series of fantasy-like animals in soft earth tones, is valued for its place in the library and for being a creation of Bohrod, a UW-Madison artist in residence and nationally-known figure who was prolific as a painter, sculptor, print maker, ceramicist and illustrator. Among his extensive works, he produced a series of Time magazine covers of Frank Sinatra, Theodore Roosevelt and others.

Bohrod, who died in 1992, was best know for his realism, making the mural especially intriguing because it's in a style that departs from much of the artist's work, Rajert said.

Neil Bohrod of Madison, the artist's son, said, "I'd like to see it saved, if possible."

Madison Arts Program Administrator Karin Wolf intends to have at least three conservators study the mural to determine how it could be saved, where it might be relocated and at what cost.

"I think almost anything could be done, but we'll know more when we hear from the conservators," Wolf said. "It's going to be a matter of cost. We'll have to ask the city, is it worth the cost?"

William Kunkler, executive vice president of the Fiore Cos., which is building the new library and redeveloping the current library site, could not be reached.

Wolf has tentatively scheduled a public hearing on the fate of the mural, and an outdoor sculpture near the library's entry by artist O.V. Shaffer, for 5:30 p.m., Feb. 10 at the Central Library, 201 W. Mifflin St.

The effort to save the mural is gaining momentum among some who may not know the artist but have fond memories of the painting.

"I hear from adults who used the library as kids, who remember it, and bring their kids here," Library Director Barb Dimick said. "It's a happy feeling for people to know it's still there."

"There's a nostalgic connection for a lot of people," Wolf said. "It is part of their first experience with the library."

Ald. Mike Verveer, 4th District, who represents the core Downtown, wants to save the artwork.

"The first time I saw it I thought it was a cool thing," Verveer said. "I think it's been a nice asset for the library all these years."

The mural, Dimick and others said, doesn't have to be part of the new facility to be preserved. "It would have to fit with the new building," she said. "That, we don't know yet."