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MADISON.GOV**Art and the city**

Council rivals weigh in on doing it in public

Jay Rath on Thursday 02/12/2009

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Is public arts funding a frill or an economic development tool? As local arts groups founder in the recession, Madison aldermanic candidates disagree.

"We need to focus on our basic needs as a community first," says Sherman Hackbarth, a candidate in Dist. 2. "Funding luxuries through additional debt is not a smart long-term fiscal strategy for the city of Madison."

Karin Wolf, program administrator of the Madison Arts Commission, sees public art as a potential casualty of the current economic crunch: "Funding was questioned in the last budget cycle, and I'm anticipating that next year will be just as rough or worse."

The city's 2009 budget, passed in November, includes \$30,000 for works of public art and \$67,000 for grants to artists and groups. The money is part of the budget for the city's Department of Planning and Development.

"The arts are a smart investment that every civic leader should understand," says Anne Katz, executive director

of Arts Wisconsin, a private, nonprofit advocacy group. She maintains that every dollar spent on the arts generates \$14 in related spending on restaurants, hotels and such.

Such arguments are probably not well understood by the Common Council, says Dist. 11 Ald. Tim Gruber, who is leaving office, as well as his slot on the Arts Commission.

"We don't always have those figures in front of us," he says. "Also, there's a lot of things like this — a sense of place, the ambience of a place — that are hard to measure, but really contribute to the success of a city."

We asked candidates in every contested aldermanic race what they thought about Arts Commission funding. (The primary is Feb. 17, and the general election is April 7.)

Not everyone replied; most who did say they personally support the arts but stress that this is a tight economy. Their responses:

Dist. 2: Adam Walsh calls the city's current levels of arts support "small expenditures," which he "would look to maintain if at all possible." Bridget Maniaci says tough economic times make for "an increased argument for the Arts Commission to offer resources to local groups," to stimulate the economy. Incumbent Brenda Konkel agrees: "I'd increase the funding and look for other ways to support the arts community," as part of the city's economic development strategy. Dennis Amadeus De Nure would greatly increase arts funding. Sherman Hackbarth is quoted above.

Dist. 5: Hamilton Arendsen calls for being "pragmatic about how we allocate our precious resources" while preserving the city's reputation as a regional arts leader. Shiva Bidar-Sielaff says she'd have to check constituents' desires.

Dist. 7: Jeremy Ryan would back an increase to "individual artists" but not "public interest groups that don't really need it to carry out their work." Aric Vander Werff would like to maintain current funding levels, "but in the current financial environment, that could not be guaranteed." Steve King says he's apt to maintain current levels.

Dist. 8: Bryon Eagon talks about the need to make "tough choices in order to continue the lines of funding," but suggests there may be ways to "free up more capital." Katrina Flores supports arts funding as a development tool, and her platform calls for more community murals.

Dist. 15: Incumbent Larry Palm says it's too early to say, but if push comes to shove "I would have other priorities." Challenger Will Sandstrom did not reply.

Dist. 17: Incumbent Joe Clausius says public art "has its place and adds to the character of any city," and calls the city's current level of support "reasonable." Challenger Scott Schroeckenthaler did not reply. Challenger Chuck Litweiler has dropped out of the race, too late to remove his name from the ballot. (It will be interesting to see how many votes he gets.)

Fantasy apartment for rent

Last week the Common Council refused the Alexander Co.'s request to rezone Acacia House fraternity, 222 Langdon St. The proposal would have allowed renovation and construction of Vesta Apartments on the parking lot behind the frat house. Vesta was to have 18 units, some with as many as four bedrooms.

For weeks, a Vesta sign by the site has proclaimed, "Now leasing for Aug. 15, 2009." The message is repeated on the [project's website](#), which shows floor plans and amenities.

The day after the proposal was shot down, the property manager, the McBride Companies, was still referring potential renters to the website. Phil Hees of McBride explained in an email that, "[because] the structure is not yet built, ...we are unable to give firsthand tours."

Contacted by *Isthmus*, Hees directed questions to the Alexander Co., which has not responded.

Brenda Konkel of the Tenant Resource Center sees "nothing wrong" about signing leases for an apartment that doesn't yet exist: "Technically, they could potentially get something approved and built by Aug. 15. I doubt it."

Konkel adds that, given the council's action, any building that gets built is unlikely to match current floor plans. "It's misrepresentation then, for sure," she says. "Whatever somebody looked at when they signed that lease isn't going to be what they're going to get."

At press time the sign and homepage still advertised "new construction" apartments with as many as four bedrooms. The floor-plan [webpage](#) changed this week to show apartments only in the existing Acacia House, none with more than three bedrooms.

Mistele on the move

County Executive candidate Nancy Mistele has made criticism of the 911 Center a, well, centerpiece of her campaign. (Local blogger Emily Mills [headlined](#) a recent offering on Mistele, "A Noun, a Verb, and the 911 Center.")

Last week Mistele toured the facility. Explains campaign manager Jon Horne: "Once you're in there, you can tell how the background noise could contribute to a communicator missing some sounds on a call." It's not known why the dispatcher who fielded a call from murdered UW student Brittany Zimmermann did not hear her

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screams or sounds of a struggle.

But Mistele seems to be grasping that she needs to have other issues. Last Thursday, she issued a [press release](#) (PDF) proclaiming "Mistele Unveils Transportation Plan." It calls for repairing roads, improving highways and offering "bus service to communities that want it." Mistele criticizes a proposed commuter-rail line as "[County Executive] Kathleen Falk's amusement train ride," saying the numerous train crossings will "make our roads more dangerous."

Asked for a copy of Mistele's transportation plan, Horne referred to the 470-word press release and said, "That's everything that's documented."

Hired guns get nod

A private law firm will be defending the county, County Exec Falk and former 911 Center dispatcher Rita Gahagan against a wrongful death lawsuit brought by the family and fiancé of slain UW student Brittany Zimmermann.

Responding to a letter from Kurt Schlicht and seven other supervisors ([Madison.gov, 1/30/09](#)), Assistant Dane County Corporation Counsel David Gault wrote that the defense will be mounted by Bell, Gierhart & Moore of Madison. The firm will determine if it has a conflict of interest representing all the defendants together.

Gault's [letter](#) (PDF) says costs and awards, if any, will be paid by the county's insurance carrier, up to the policy's \$5 million per claim limit (with a \$250,000 deductible). The county is responsible for any amount in excess of that. The plaintiffs seek more than \$50 million in damages.

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