

ISTHMUS | The Daily Page

Wanted: Imagination

Public input sought in planning downtown culture

by Jay Rath

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Creative minds already craft performances and works of art. They and the public will be challenged to craft downtown Madison's arts future at a city planning session in the Madison Municipal Building on Sept. 25.

"I'm really hoping it's a creative coup," says Karin Wolf, arts program administrator for the Madison Arts Commission. "Unconventional is good, especially at this point in the Downtown Plan process."

The city's Downtown Plan will include, but is not restricted to, bricks-and-mortar guidelines for future public and private development. The arts element is divided into several themes, including recreation, culture and entertainment. The plan will be written this fall and reviewed by the city in January.

The commission is also embarking on a citywide cultural plan; the Downtown Plan will have some overlap. The Arts Commission itself is part of the Madison Department of Planning and Community and Economic Development.

"So many good things are happening right now," says Wolf. "A lot of people have already contributed, but I keep telling people there isn't enough attention to art and design, and this is our opportunity."

Some of the suggestions generated at a June public Downtown Plan meeting at the Overture Center for the Arts included: establishment of a downtown arts incubator, more office space for performing arts organizations, live theater along the lakefronts, an arts tax incremental financing district and encouragement of street entertainment.

Downtown Madison Inc., co-host of the upcoming meeting, has already been hosting a monthly discussion group to address one perennial concern: how to better link city arts activities and those of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. One of the ideas at the Overture meeting was to connect the new UW arts lofts at 111 N. Frances St. with the adjacent Mifflin and Greenbush neighborhoods, perhaps with a pedestrian bridge over rail lines, and to identify the area as an arts district.

At the upcoming meeting, Wolf says, "What we want to do is extract the material already generated that's directly about the arts, and show people what's there. But I definitely want to see if we can find more."

Wolf is hoping for organizational and funding solutions that can be woven into a comprehensive whole, as well as smaller specifics. She especially wants involvement from all downtown neighborhoods.

For example, she says, "One idea I heard is to have a coffee cart in the Victorian park in the Mansion Hill district," with acoustic musical performances on summer Sunday mornings. "Those are the kinds of things I think people can talk about, either specifically or very broadly."

To learn more about the Downtown Plan visit www.cityofmadison.com/neighborhoods/downtownplan.

Downtown Plan arts discussion

Madison Municipal Building, room 260

Friday, Sept. 25, 10 am