



EUREKA SPRINGS : Manager: City dragging feet on art exhibit

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EUREKA SPRINGS - Procrastination is being used as a political tactic to kill an outdoor art exhibit in Eureka Springs, its organizer said this week.

Artists for this year's exhibit at The Artery won't have time to finish their paintings and have them on the wall by Sept. 6 if Mayor Dani Joy and the Eureka Springs City Council keep dragging their feet over who should oversee the project, said Charlotte Buchanan, the exhibit's organizer.

Joy said she had received several calls from tourists complaining about the city-owned wall, which is covered with 25 paintings. The complaints concerned two paintings in particular, one of The Divine Mother breastfeeding and another of a man wearing women's lingerie.

Tim Weaver, the city attorney, began drafting a contract for operation of the gallery on the 150-foot retaining wall along First Street. The contract is still in the works.

On Monday, the City Council took no action on the exhibit. Two aldermen missed the meeting, and the four who attended tabled the issue until June 22.

Alderman Bob Wagner said The Artery should be "tabled to infinity."

"It's running the clock," said Buchanan, who said she expected to see a final version of the contract at the meeting on Monday. "That's the main thing that's worrying me. These are 8-foot panels. They don't just happen overnight."

But James DeVito, a City Council member, said tabling the issue was the best alternative.

"If it wasn't delayed [Monday] night, it would have been dead," he said. "In my opinion, the September deadline is an arbitrary thing Ms. Buchanan put out there. The other side is it's not going to happen at all and it all comes down."

"It's not arbitrary," Buchanan said. "The reason why we picked that date is it's Labor Day and a butt load of tourists are in town."

For the current exhibit, which has the theme "icons," the 27 original participating artists had six months to each paint a 4-by-8-foot panel. For the next exhibit, which has the theme "seasons," the artists will have less than three months to produce the paintings if they go on display as planned, Buchanan said.

Buchanan founded The Artery, and the first exhibit went on display in 2005. Since then, Buchanan's selection committee has chosen the artists. For the first two exhibits, the themes were "still life" and "water," and the exhibits stayed up for one year. Starting in 2007, the exhibit has been up for two years.

DeVito said aldermen appear to be split on The Artery issue. Three council members want to pull the plug on the project, and three - including DeVito - want to keep it. But for The Artery to remain, the three council members who want to keep it also want the artwork to be approved by an entity other than Buchanan's selection committee, which consists of three gallery owners; Buchanan; her husband, artist James Yale; and her apprentice, Rosie Rose.

The contract will call for a committee of 12 to jury The Artery - six people chosen by the city and six by Buchanan, DeVito said.

The main issue with the contract concerns the entities that would be involved.

Buchanan wants the contract to be between the city and Congressional District Programs, a nonprofit organization in Washington that encourages philanthropy. Buchanan said Congressional District Programs is an umbrella organization over The Artery. The organization would take 6 percent of the profit from sales of the art and provide accounting and other services. DeVito said he'd feel more comfortable if the contract was between the city and people who live near Eureka Springs, such as Buchanan and Yale.

If the City Council vote is split at 3-3, that would leave Mayor Joy with the deciding vote. The mayor recently said the art should be juried by artists who live outside the area.

DeVito said the city doesn't want to take over operation of the outdoor exhibit, but the alderman want the right to veto controversial artwork that could appear on the wall. The artists say that's censorship, but DeVito said the city has that right for artwork that will be displayed in a public place.

"We don't want to run the wall," he said, "but we don't want anything going up that would be in your face. ... We're responsible for everybody in the community, and those people have a right not to be visually assaulted on a city street. You cannot deny the controversy that has been levied about this."

DeVito said he's received about 40 e-mails from people complaining about the wall. That's more than for any other issue since he was elected as an alderman three years ago. The attention came after a May 24 article in the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette spawned follow-up coverage on AOL News online and FOX News, both online and through its Fayetteville television affiliate.

About 90 percent of the complaints concerned *The Divine Mother* by Michelle Levy of Eureka Springs. In her artist's statement on www.thearterysite.com, Levy said the painting is "a meld of different traditions - Virgin Mary and Isis."

The image of Mary breastfeeding the baby Jesus was popular in the late Middle Ages and is similar to images of Isis breastfeeding baby Horus, Levy wrote on the Web site.

DeVito said it's not the breastfeeding that has bothered people so much as the words "Does this halo make my face look fat?" above Mary's head.

The other painting that has been controversial is called *The Temptation of Alice* by Beth Post of Fayetteville. It shows Alice in Wonderland allegedly being tempted by a man wearing women's lingerie.

While Buchanan has assured the City Council that nothing obscene would go up on The Artery wall, DeVito countered that potentially controversial religious material may be more difficult to judge than obscenity.

DeVito also said Buchanan's agreement to operate The Artery was made with a handshake. But the other hand was that of Kathy Harrison, the previous mayor, and the decision was approved by a different City Council.

"We changed administrations, and we changed councils," DeVito said. "Some of us don't like city business being done on a handshake."

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