



Questions over local public art resurface

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CHAPEL HILL -- Last September, the \$52 million Town Operations Center on Millhouse Road garnered attention for more than just its new transit and public works facilities.

The center also features \$420,000 in public art created by Washington, D.C.-based artist Larry Kirkland. At the time, a few Chapel Hill residents questioned why the investment -- required by the town's Percent for Art Ordinance, a policy allocating 1 percent of selected capital projects for public art -- wasn't given to local artists.

More grumbled about the rationale for placing an installation of that scope in an area that's off the beaten path for most residents.

Chapel Hill Town Councilman Matt Czajkowski reanimated at least one of those questions recently when he asked about the possibility of reserving public art funding for local artists.

"I don't see the nation's art community taking great note that Chapel Hill commissioned a nationally renowned artist to do its transit station," Czajkowski said. "At the minimum, we should always ask the question, can we do this well by artists living in Chapel Hill?"

The topic came up during a staff update on changes within the town's public arts structure. Last fall, the council decided to create a new Public Art Advisory Commission that will answer directly to the town.

The autonomous Chapel Hill Public Arts Commission -- previously responsible for recommending projects for Percent for Art funds, artist selection and several other art functions -- will continue in a fundraising, promotional and support capacity. In other words, the town has more control over public art, and Czajkowski wants to see local creators empowered as well.

"I just think that most artists are starving, and why wouldn't we want to effectively subsidize our local arts community to the extent that we have the funds?" he asked.

Other council members agree the topic deserves discussion, while making a case that the artist selection should process remain open. "I certainly see the value in using local artists, at least in certain occasions," said Councilman Mark Kleinschmidt, who serves as the council liaison to the CHPAC.

However, he said public art is more than just an aesthetic institution; it's an economic development tool that could be stunted by limiting it to a smaller pool of artists. "Certain communities are destinations because they have invested in public art," Kleinschmidt said. "Chapel Hill has the potential to become that kind of community.

"There are lots of communities that have been successful in using public art to enhance their attractiveness. Asheville's a great example. It's loaded with public art. We don't get in our cars to go to Asheville [just for the art], but it's one of the reasons we enjoy being there."

CHPAC Chair Frank Webb wants local artists to compete with national figures like Mikyoung Kim, the Massachusetts artist hired to work on Chapel Hill's Streetscape Master Plan.

"It would be very restrictive," he said of a move to limit who can receive public art funds. He called commissions by artists like Kim a "plus-plus" that makes Chapel Hill more appealing and brings attention to the local creative community.

Webb stressed that aside from major projects like Streetscape and Lot 5, there are many outlets for local artists. CHPAC organizes exhibitions at Town Hall and the public library, the annual Community Art Project and others.

"We want to have the possibility of having the best that you can get," said Chapel Hill Mayor Kevin Foy. "We wanted the best artist in the country [Kim] and we got it."

Nonetheless, Czajkowski's point is "worth talking about and knowing what we want to achieve," Foy added.

One member of the local art community would like Chapel Hill to increase its Percent for Art requirement and change the way it's allocated. Jon Wilner, executive director of The ArtsCenter in Carrboro, recommended that the town bump its ordinance to 2 percent, using half for public art and the other half for all other art projects.

He said that approach would take art out of the town budgeting process and potentially increase the funding for creative works at the same time. Town Council members and staff theoretically would be left with more money to deal with practical concerns like homelessness.

As for reassessing who can receive public art funds, Wilner, a critic of the Town Operations Center installations, thinks justice can be done within the boundaries of the current ordinance. "I want to make it clear that I'm not opposed to bringing public art in from outside the community," he said. "What I think needs to happen, though, is there needs to be balance."

Wilner pointed out that the town could have paid 10 local artists to create a sculpture garden in place of the bench and wall created by Kirkland at the operations center. That kind of project would have been more likely to become a destination, Wilner said.

"I think they missed an opportunity to use local art," he said.

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