

City must continue to encourage public-art projects

Since 1821, when Alexander Ralston first began incorporating spaces for public art in his design of Indianapolis, the city has been able to maintain a strong tradition of public art.

Today is a good time to evaluate what must be done now to sustain and enhance that 185-year tradition.

For those not familiar with the term, public art is art—big or small, painting or sculpture—that is placed in public space or funded by public dollars. The Soldiers and Sailors Monument on the Circle is a classic example.

Interest in public art has ebbed and flowed over the decades but gained a significant boost in the 1950s and 1960s when the General Services Administration mandated the Art-in-Architecture program, which encouraged the commitment of 0.5 percent of the cost of construction or repair of federal property to the funding of public art.

Today, many major cities—including nearby Chicago and St. Louis—have percent-for-art programs. Indianapolis currently does not have a percent-for-art ordinance in place, but it is vigorously exploring that option, according to the Freeman/Whitehurst Group's Indianapolis Public Art Master Plan for the Arts Council of Indianapolis.



VOICES FROM THE INDUSTRY

Fred Green

It is an option that deserves serious consideration. The benefits of art in public space are numerous, both from an internal and external perspective.

Communities that incorporate public art into their streets and buildings provide a safer, more inviting and interesting backdrop for the everyday life of local residents. Public art inspires a sense of ownership and pride in one's own neighborhood, which often results in safer and cleaner streets and a more close knit, cooperative spirit among residents—the true sense of the word “community.”

The external goal of public art projects is to welcome the global community with open arms. A large metropolitan center like Indianapolis, which hosts many regional, national and international events, wants to look its best under the spotlight. Monumental works of public sculpture and painting create a distinctive character or signature we want tourists and other visitors to recall—like the Gateway Arch has done for St. Louis.

A major part of Mayor Bart Peterson's initiative for the cultural development of Indianapolis includes the beautification of major “gateways” into the city, including the prominence of public art at Indianapolis International Airport.

Lilly Endowment is helping further those objectives by granting \$2.5 million to the growth of the Indianapolis Cultural Development Commission. This agency partners with the Arts Council of Indianapolis, Indianapolis Downtown Inc. and the Indianapolis Convention & Visitors Association in increasing the city's cultural appeal for tourists.

Public art also bolsters an area's economic value and makes it more appealing for investors. Outside businesses looking to relocate a branch or headquarters will look more favorably on a community that appears to be safe and appreciated by its residents. That also holds true for local business owners.

An excellent example is the Monon Trail, the conversion of an abandoned railroad into an exercise trail complete with sculptures and murals along the route. These amenities generate increased traffic along the trail, which in turn has increased property values and the success of businesses abutting the trail from Carmel to Broad Ripple—and eventually to downtown Indianapolis.

The city is now planning the Indianapolis Cultural Trail, which hopefully will have the same effects as the Monon Trail in its target neighborhoods. With a projected completion date of 2009, the Cultural Trail will be a walking and biking path connecting the downtown areas of Fountain Square, Indiana Avenue, Massachusetts Avenue, White River State Park, the Wholesale District and Monument Circle. It also will act as a central hub of the entire Indy Greenways system, which includes the Monon Trail.

The evidence is persuasive that public art enhances communities on many levels, both internally and externally. The city would do well to include more public art as a focus of government funding and support over the next few years. We have much to gain if we do – but also much to lose to competing cities if we don't. •

Green is president and chief operating officer of Cripe Architects & Engineers of Indianapolis. Views expressed here are the writer's.