

New Rochelle using the arts to rejuvenate the downtown



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New Rochelle is using the arts to attract millennials to the downtown and generate revenue.



(Photo: Seth Harrison/The Journal News)

NEW ROCHELLE - Andy Warhol once said that "making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art."

The city is counting on his being right, as it looks to create an arts and culture district to wake up a sleepy downtown by attracting businesses, people and activity.

Revenue is one byproduct of a lively arts scene, said ArtsWestchester CEO Janet Langsam. Another is an influx of visitors and new residents, particularly millennials.

"The arts become an attraction for millennials and for tourists. It can make residents more committed to their cities and proud of their environments," Langsam said. "The arts make cities into special places."

The arts are a major component of New Rochelle's 10-year makeover plan that will see restaurants, stores, hotels and 5,500 housing units rise in the downtown.

At the center of it all will be an 8,000-square-foot "black box" theater at the former Loews Theater site. The new venue will provide an adaptive performance space for plays, dance and music shows, along with movies, poetry slams and other cultural events. The theater is included in the proposal made by RDRXR, hired to be New Rochelle's master developer in the downtown overhaul.

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[City Councilman Ivar Hyden \(/story/news/local/westchester/new-rochelle/2016/02/09/new-rochelle-ivar-hyden-housing/79867090/\)](/story/news/local/westchester/new-rochelle/2016/02/09/new-rochelle-ivar-hyden-housing/79867090/), who owns a downtown framing gallery, is a strong supporter of the push to infuse art and culture into the area.

"The arts bring revenue into a city, and that's been shown statistically over and over again throughout the country," he said. "The whole idea is to bring people and to bring business to the downtown. If you get a critical mass started, then it feeds itself."

Re-sculpting the city's core comes as an RDRXR analysis shows that New Rochelle loses millions of dollars in potential retail and food sales each year to nearby communities that attract more residents and customers.

A [study by Americans for the Arts \(http://www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/reports-and-data/research-studies-publications/arts-economic-prosperity-iv/national-findings\)](http://www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/reports-and-data/research-studies-publications/arts-economic-prosperity-iv/national-findings) supports the idea that the arts can bring significant revenue to communities that support them. The group found that nonprofit arts and culture organizations pumped an estimated \$61 billion into the national economy in 2010. In addition, the study found, the audience for creative events and exhibits that year generated \$74 billion in revenue for merchants, hotels and other local businesses.

In Westchester, according to the study, art and cultural organizations were responsible for \$96.8 million in revenue in 2010, and generated an additional \$59.6 million for local businesses. Patrons attending local art and cultural events in the county spent an average of \$22.17 per person on food, gifts, transportation and lodging, the study found. Nationally, the average was \$24.60.

"If 100 people come to see an exhibit or gallery, at least 50 people will spread to the restaurants," said New Rochelle artist Patrick Bancel, who's painted several murals on buildings in the city. "I see it all the time."

That kind of economic activity, and the resulting tax revenue, are what's prompting New Rochelle to recreate its downtown with an artsier palette.

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New Rochelle City Councilman Ivar Hyden with artist Maya Menon in Backstreet Gallery and Framing. (Photo: Seth Harrison/The Journal News)

It's a strategy that was embraced in Peekskill two decades ago and led to a livelier downtown with a reputation as an artists' mecca.

"A lively arts scene draws people and businesses to a downtown by making it a more vibrant and enjoyable place to live, work and shop," said Ralph DiBart, executive director of New Rochelle's Business Improvement District (BID). "We saw this happen in Peekskill, where the artists' district transformed the core of the city into a place where entrepreneurs were eager to open new businesses."

More recently, Yonkers has been dabbling with a paint set of its own, commissioning the painting of six downtown murals and approving a special Artisan and Industry District at the multi-block tract that was once home to the Alexander Smith Carpet Mills.

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In its quest to become a cultural center, New Rochelle has offered incentives for the inclusion of arts space in major construction projects. Just this month, for example, the New Rochelle Industrial Development Authority (IDA) approved \$520,000 tax benefits for a four-story storage center. In return, the owner is deeding the 12,000-square-foot ground floor to the city. It will most likely house a creative technology makerspace, said Luiz Aragon, New Rochelle's commissioner of development.

"What we are trying to accomplish here is no different than what has historically happened throughout the world," Aragon said. "When artists move into the community, they change the fabric of the neighborhoods."

The BID — working separately from the development department — is carrying out arts initiatives of its own, bringing in regional and international artists to create public artworks.

"As our arts initiatives get underway, visitors will see a new era in downtown New Rochelle," DiBart said.

One innovative project will see the creation of public art in a vacant building as its agents work to attract permanent tenants. Renovations were recently completed at the 5 Anderson St. luxury apartment building, and the owners have agreed to turn over empty, street-level storefronts to six artists for three months.

The artists, selected by the BID with help from Brooklyn-based nonprofit Residency Unlimited, will use the space to work on various interactive projects for public perusal. One, for example, will create a sculpture from discarded materials found around the city.



New Rochelle artist Patrick Bancel stands under one of several murals he has painted in downtown New Rochelle. (Photo: Seth Harrison/The Journal News)

"I'm not asking them to bring in a final, completed piece of art to hang on the wall," said Livia Alexander, a Residency Unlimited consultant. "This is going to be a place for artists to experiment and develop their practice that will be specific to New Rochelle."

The BID will also host a series of exhibits, performances and galleries in two vacant apartments and an outdoor patio, along with the building's roof and basement during the three months.

Also coming soon is the creation of a solar-powered perpetual motion machine in a yet-to-be announced public space by Agnieszka Kurant, a Polish artist whose work has appeared on the facade of the Guggenheim. The BID used a \$50,000 Green Mountain Energy Sun Club grant to commission Kurant for the project.

New Rochelle native Maya Menon, 24, whose posters hang in the children's section of the New Rochelle Public Library, said the city's new emphasis on the arts will help attract other young professionals and artists.

"I would come here, not just because I like art or because I live here, but because it's where the action is happening," said Menon, who works in Hyden's framing shop. "The arts attract more people, they attract more energy, and people spend money."

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