

Arts Help wants to leave a lasting impression on Library Square

Mo Ghoneim believes in the simple principle of "for the community, by the community."

As an Aurora native, it is a philosophy that guides his work as co-founder and managing director of Arts Help, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping groups develop projects and programming for social change. And it is a philosophy he and his partners are looking to bring back to Aurora through the development of Library Square.

Arts Help, which was founded with the aim of "art making the world a better place," is seeking to bring traditional and non-traditional art forms to the downtown revitalization project now underway through what they describe as an "interactive digital network" that will provide programming within the walls of Library Square, as well as allow programming to reach all corners of Aurora and beyond.

"Our mandate has always been inclusivity as an organization," Mr. Ghoneim said as he and partners Sophie Brussaux and Mercedes Custodio pitched their idea to Council last week. "Why we're really excited about the Library Square project is it is aligned with everything that we stand for as an organization: it is a place that is for the community by the community and, for us, we believe in starting locally and being engaged on a grassroots level within our community of creative industries. Our key objectives for this proposal [were] really driven by community and engagement.

"This is a really big project for the Town. For me, at least in my lifetime in the Town, this is probably one of the biggest projects I have seen come to life and we know that it is really important for us to be able to create awareness for this incredible project."

The work of Arts Help, he said, is guided by 17 goals outlined by the United Nations, including eliminating poverty, taking climate action, and promoting health and education. Their goal is to "really align Aurora as a resourceful and innovative Town through Arts."

Their vision for an "interactive digital network" would see digital screens permanently installed within Library Square.

"We eliminate having limitations around what we can do when we go digital," he continued. "For example, we could have programming where we showcase local community members. If you're a non-traditional artist, say a graphic designer, you can exhibit your work through these digital screens. You're able to bring people out to your exhibit and show them your work, so maybe there is an interest for them to hire you as a graphic freelancer in Aurora. Or, if you're a professional artist, the sky is the limit being able to program them.

"Leading up to the development of Library Square, we would be working on building an online community that is very grassroots for the Town of Aurora and integrating this online community with the digital network. Think of as art in Aurora, for example, on social media—that would be something we would be working with local artists and creating a portal for them to be able to upload, submit, vote on what kind of programming they want to see. It is not just artists but anybody who has a passion for art or is interested. We would use this social media platform to really be the driving force for how we basically program for the interactive digital network."

While the fine details of the proposal, and the Town's involvement, still need to be hammered out, their idea was received warmly by most members of Council.

Prior to last week's General Committee meeting, the principals of Arts Help met with the majority of local lawmakers. Following their presentation to the entire complement of elected members, those who had met with the creatives reiterated their support.

"What I saw in the display really blew me away. I am not known to be an artistic or creative person, but the juices were flowing as the presentation was going on," said Councillor Harold Kim. "This opens up a lot of options. This is not just one room that is going

to be stagnant with the novelty of it wearing off ? but each year you evolve into something bigger and better and it is going to be different each and every year. That type of vision?makes Library Square an exciting place to be.?

Added Councillor Rachel Gilliland: ?[Art] really does elevate our spirits, our creativity and?art is one of those neutral places where everyone can feel together and included.?

Mayor Tom Mrakas also expressed his support, stating this will help put Aurora on ?the international stage when it comes to arts.?

?Art is subjective, everyone looks at it in their own way, and sees it their own way,? he said. ?When I see what is being presented, I think of all the goals we have for Library Square and I think it meets many of those goals of creating a gathering space and bringing people back continuously.?

Councillors John Gallo and Wendy Gaertner, however, were more tempered in their support.

While Councillor Gallo said it was ?a great idea,? he said he was ?a bit of a traditionalist? and would prefer to see art installed within the Square itself rather than digital media throughout the indoor components of the redevelopment.

?To me, a lot of thought should be put on this and we certainly shouldn't knee-jerk and make a decision,? he said. ?There should be some thought as to how to best promote the Square as far as the arts.?

Councillor Gaertner had a similar view, and expressed some pause over the budget should this come to pass. Arts Help says that in the first year, they would be looking at a budget of \$256,000 and additional fees would be required should programming continue.

?I think what you're doing is fascinating and far-reaching, and certainly would involve a lot of people in the community and I congratulate you on your vision, but?hopefully we can figure out a little mix and match here,? she said.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter