

Pop up art: Lexington, Ky., creates Art on the Town program to promote local artists

By JULIE YOUNG | The Municipal

Heather Lyons knows that arts are a valuable component to the state and local economy. In fact, according to the 2020 Department of Commerce's Bureau of Economic Analysis, Kentucky has more than 46,000 artists, who make up 2.4% of the state's workforce and add \$5.6 billion to the economy. In order to create opportunities for people to encounter art and explore all that is unique about the Bluegrass State, Lyons, the director of Arts & Cultural Affairs for the Lexington-Fayette (KY) Urban County Government, created "Art on the Town" — a program designed to help artists showcase and sell their work.

"We know that visitors like to purchase items that are representative of the places they visit, and local arts and crafts really speak to our region," she said. "Aside from a few galleries in downtown Lexington, there are no retail venues for artists to regularly sell their work."

Putting the cart before the art

Conceived in 2021 and launched this past June with money from the city budget as well as with a grant from the Knight Foundation and assistance from the Bluegrass Community Foundation, Art on the Town features eight mobile carts that serve as a pop-up shop of sorts for local fine artists, craftspeople and authors. The carts are available seven



Watercolor and pastel artist Marianna McDonald works on a painting while showcasing her artwork on one of Lexington, Ky.'s, Art on the Town carts. (Photo provided by Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government)

days a week and are free to use, giving dozens of individual artists and small creative businesses a highly visible, low-cost opportunity to sell their work and cultivate a customer base.

"The carts are mobile and can move around within several block areas of downtown Lexington," Lyons said. "Artists are welcome to set up anytime in plaza areas along the newly completed Town Branch Commons in Downtown Lexington. We also partner with other groups and organizations that are presenting downtown events such as the Saturday farmer's market, the weekly Thursday Night Live, Gallery HOP nights, and other fairs and festivals."

The group also works with Visit Lex, the local convention and visitors' bureau to notify artists of dates when large conferences and conventions are coming to town. Lyons said Art on the Town artists are now being invited to set up their carts and sell their work at private and ticketed events throughout downtown Lexington.

Local artists who have already juried in other respected programs such as the Kentucky Arts Council's Kentucky Crafted program or the Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen, as well as other art shows and exhibits, are eligible to apply for a cart. After submitting their application, getting approved, and attending an orientation



Lexington basket maker Derek Downing stands beside his Art on the Town cart. These eight carts allow local artists to have low-cost pop-up shops all yearlong. (Photo provided by Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government)



Lexington officials announce the launch of Art on the Town carts designed to help local artists showcase their wares alongside basket maker Derek Downing and watercolor/pastel artist Marianna McDonald. (Photo provided by Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government)

session, they can start scheduling their carts to display their work.

“Lexington is excited to harness this energy and economic momentum through interactive and creative placemaking in downtown Lexington,” Lyons said.

Painting the picture

In an effort to give visitors access to local artwork and create an opportunity for artists to sell their wares, Lyons began working on the idea for Art on the Town 18 months ago. She met with local artists, downtown businesses and art-based groups to determine what kind of program would best support local talent. In addition to the lack of retail venues in which artists could sell their work, the cancellation of fairs, festivals and other special events due to the COVID-19 pandemic caused many artists to lose every opportunity they had to display and sell their products. The program was announced in May, and the carts hit the street a month later. She said so far, Art on the Town has been a big hit with residents and guests alike.

“The public reaction has been wonderful,” Lyons said. “Our community members and visitors love seeing and engaging with artists on the street. Many artists are not only selling their work but also creating new pieces at their cart location so visitors and community members get to see artists working as well. The artists are wonderful ambassadors and add a warm and lively presence along the sidewalks, plazas and parks in downtown Lexington.”

The carts are available to artists all yearlong but will not be utilized on the streets during the winter months. Instead, artists will participate indoors at an upcoming conference that will be held in the city, which will hopefully lead to additional opportunities for more year-round sales.

Art on the Town carts are typically set up in high-traffic areas such as along the Town Branch Commons, outside the Marriott and Hilton hotels, in Tandy Centennial Park and, naturally, along Main Street. Triangle Park is another downtown location that hosts various events and has invited Art on the Town

participants to take part in a wine tasting event being held there as well.

“Some construction is going on with a major renovation of Central Bank Center, which houses Rupp Arena and Convention space,” Lyons said.

When the construction is completed, Lyons stated Art on the Town will also set up there when large conventions are in town. She also has additional ideas to help expand the program and incorporate live performances and local university students to take part in displays.

“Artists are enormously resourceful, innovative and a great asset to any community,” Lyons said. “I would encourage communities to invite artists in to discuss ideas that will benefit them as well as the (municipality). The success of Art on the Town happened because there are benefits to all participants. The artists benefit from selling their work, and the community benefits by enhancing visitor experiences when they are in town. The artists are providing additional reasons for people to come downtown — and that helps everyone.” **M**