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Roanoke to launch 'Year of the Artist'

Initiative starts virtually on Tuesday, with goals that include supporting young creative people

ANNE SAMPSON

Special to The Roanoke Times

Roanoke has benefited for decades from a vibrant arts community. As that community adjusts to a health crisis and its challenges, the city has designated fiscal year 2022-2023 the "Year of the Artist," a program aimed at developing a creative problem-solvers' collective.

The program will launch Tuesday, with the newly formed Roanoke Artists Network meeting online to begin planning. The network will meet four more times before the official kick-off July 1. It's not yet clear what that kick-off will look like.

"We're building this as we go," Douglas Jackson, the city's arts and culture coordinator, said. "We have some structure, but we hope we're going to build a learning community. We're intentionally not releasing everything at once because we want to see what we can make."

The network mission is three-fold: brainstorm new ways to support young creatives; meet community challenges; and further integrate arts into the city fabric. Implementation would follow.

"First we want to get everybody together and talk about what's possible," Jackson said. "We'll have trainings, give grants, have exhibits and mentorship, get artists involved with the city and have artist-driven

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plans and projects. We'll learn as we do it."

The concept is not limited to visual arts, said stalwart Roanoke-based jazz pianist William Penn.

"The Year of the Artist is for all forms of art, musicians, writers, dancers; it's for the whole art community," Penn said. "We don't have a narrow definition of art."

Penn, whose music career spans decades, chairs the Roanoke Arts Commission's fundraising committee.

Studies show that the arts have an increasing and positive impact on people and communities, including better physical and mental health; better school grades; greater capacity for compassion and empathy; and more local engagement. The collective result: more livable communities.

"We've given a lot of thought to pandemic hardships," said Katherine Devine, a local visual artist with a long history of community involvement in the Roanoke Valley. "We're asking, 'How can we as artists impact our community as part of recovery [from COVID]? Artists are the bridge to the community.'"



PHOTOS BY ANNE SAMPSON, SPECIAL TO THE ROANOKE TIMES

In a photo from July 2020, Roanoke artists collaborate on the End Racism Now Urban Arts Project. Roanoke's city-organized Year of the Artist program aims in part to build artist collectives across media.

The Roanoke Artist Network will meet online at 6:30 p.m. Tuesdays. Subsequent meeting topic themes include "Artists as Arts Leaders," "Partnerships and Collaborations" and "Building on Assets and Resources." Organizers at each meeting will issue a new "Call for Artists" — an invitation to submit work for a specific theme or purpose.

The project received about \$270,000 through a National Endowment for the Arts grant, money from the city and the federal 2021 American Rescue Plan Act stimulus package.

"It's so great not to have to worry that if we support one effort, we're slighting another," Devine said. "It's a generous budget."

The Year of the Artist coincides with the city implementing a new comprehensive plan.

"A year ago, with adoption of the city 2040 Comprehensive Plan and the annual Strategic Plan, we reinforced our commitment to enhancing the vitality of our neighborhoods," City Manager Bob Cowell said in a news release. "Expanding public art efforts is one way we're exploring alignment with the established goals in these plans. We're inviting artists to explore with us, create with us, and help us effect change."

The 2040 Comprehensive Plan addresses public space in a section called "Livable Built Environment: Interactive Spaces." It reads in part, "Roanoke recognizes that vibrant spaces create a sense of community and social interaction. Policies for interactive spaces focus on creating physical, public places for people to come together."

"We want to co-create these projects with our community of artists," Roanoke Arts Commission Chair Cari C. Gates said in the news release. "We know the arts can help us form a healthier, more prosperous, and more



Roanoke-based artist Katherine Devine and jazz musician William Penn stand at city hall with Douglas Jackson (right), the city's arts and culture coordinator. The three are part of the city's Year of the Artist initiative.

welcoming community. The arts can foster strong and effective citizen engagement and connect us in surprising ways. With these projects, we're setting out to learn how this can be uniquely done here in Roanoke."

As part of the initiative's collaborative nature, all city departments may bring ideas to the table.

"Susan Jennings was the first [arts and culture director], and she was fantastic about work-

ing with the city across departments," Jackson said. "Now, say, Public Works or Transportation will come to us and say, 'Hey, how about this art project?' So, we get an artist at the table as we talk about it. We're going to put a lot of emphasis on that aspect."

Organizers hope that the Year of the Artist will become on-going policy for meeting challenges in Roanoke, rather than a one-and-done project.

"Art-making is creative prob-



Roanoke artists on Campbell Avenue Southwest, working together on the End Racism Now Urban Arts Project, July 2020.



Children look on as members of the Roanoke Ballet Theatre perform the Russian Dance from The Nutcracker at the Grandin Village Christmas Market. Roanoke officials and members of the arts community are combining on a "Year of the Artist" initiative, to further weave arts into the city fabric.

lem-solving," Devine said. "We have a number of problems that are new to our community because of the new situation we find ourselves in now. Strengthening our creativity will help us address these issues."

Jackson added: "We want to be a welcoming community where

everyone can contribute. This is what we're trying to build. Artists are a stand-in for everybody. We want people to be able to say, 'This what the arts do for me, this is how I'm creative, and this is how I'm growing.'"

Learn more and register to participate at roanokearts.org/YOTA.