

He's taking downtown on excellent ARTventure

By KATHLEEN DEELY | September 16, 2006



Revolving Museum Director Jerry Beck's ARTventures concept aims to energize the downtown, filling streets, parks and canals with lights and public art. SUN / DAVID BROW

LOWELL -- Picture this: Parks illuminated with lanterns at night, video projected on smokestacks, movies flickering on screens above canals.

It's not San Antonio, Texas, or even Providence, R.I.

It's Jerry Beck's Lowell.

The latest idea to come from the Revolving Museum director is ARTventures, a public art series designed to bring all of the above downtown come May 2007.

"This could really change the way people feel about a city," Brian Connors, Lowell's director of economic development, said at a presentation of ARTventures at the Shattuck Street museum this week.

The concept will cost \$100,000 to get off the ground, said Beck, who is starting to drum up support from local business leaders. The idea, similar to Providence's WaterFire, where bonfires light up downtown canals, will help revitalize the city through outdoor art and entertainment, Beck said.

Centered on abandoned and underused areas along the Merrimack River, such as smokestacks, Lucy Larcom Park and the Riverwalk, the carnival-like series should enliven the downtown.

"When this is in place, who is not going to want to come downtown?" said Beck.

Dovetailing with events like Lowell Folk Festival and Southeast Asian Water Festival, ARTventures is designed to be a yearlong mainstay that Beck hopes to spread throughout the city.

The museum's Visionary School, a public art academy made up of Lowell High School students launched this fall, will make ARTventures its main focus. Beck also hopes to involve 1,000 students from nearby communities and organizations like the Merrimack Repertory Theatre and the Angkor Dance Troupe in the project.

Experts at UMass Lowell's Green Chemistry Department are being tapped to help the museum use solar power to light the parks and Riverwalk at night. John Warner, director of the Center for Green Chemistry at UMass, will help develop film shorts on the Industrial Revolution and the new green chemistry evolution.

"The university community, the Revolving Museum community and Greater Lowell's community have an opportunity to create together. This event shines a light on that," said Warner.

To sustain this series, Beck has an agreement from Hunt Alternatives Funding, a Cambridge-based group that funds youth arts organizations, to match donations made. In the next several months Beck will be reaching out to different groups in the city and festival foundations seeking contributions.

A key member of the banking community is already on board.

"I think it's a perfect tie-in. The whole lighting of the downtown buildings adds a whole new dimension and life to the city and I think it deserves all the support and commitment that we can give it," said George Duncan, chairman of Enterprise Bank.

Because the project will be fueled by youths, Lowell High grounds will play a part in the transformation.

Plans for this ambitious series did not happen overnight.

"I'm always thinking, how do we best serve Lowell? There are all these great relationships with our partners. Now let's do something miraculous and shoot for the stars," said Beck.

Connors agreed, discussing the importance of San Antonio's Riverwalk as an economic generator, not just for the city, but for the state of Texas. That city's Riverwalk, lined with shops and restaurants, has generated \$800 million for the downtown, said Connors.

"It is the second biggest tourist attraction besides the Alamo," he said. "An active waterway can do an amazing amount of things."

If the museum does not reach its fund-raising goal, the show will go on.

"It will happen. Even if we don't get the money," said Beck.