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Artspace sounds like just what Gaines Street needs

GERALD ENSLEY • THE VIEW FROM HERE • MARCH 23, 2008

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Tallahassee attorney Ken Van Assenderp, an intellectual activist on many subjects, rails about Tallahassee's schizophrenic economic development.

He believes our political leaders too often pursue growth for growth's sake rather than pursuing enterprises that emphasize and complement our "assets," his term for our historic industries of government and education.

He contends Tallahassee should have gone all-out to land the Torrey Pines research company, which would have drawn partnerships with our universities. He contends Tallahassee never should have let Panama City muscle past us for an international airport, which would have better served our government and universities.

"We are a brainpower town. That's our asset," Van Assenderp said. "The failure to understand who we are means we don't know what to do. Once we understand who we are, we'll know what to do (in pursuing new business)."

That's a point worth repeating April 9 when city commissioners consider the first concrete step toward Gaines Street redevelopment: the Artspace project. The project has a chance to be a real catalyst for the long-sought dream of making Gaines Street an arts-and-entertainment district. And it would do so in a way that capitalizes on our assets of government and education. After all, bureaucrats and teachers are artists, too.

"When we say *artists*, we're talking about people who work with their brains and with their expressions," Peggy Brady said. "The character of this community is its creative class."

Brady is executive director of Tallahassee's Council on Culture & Arts, the driving force behind the Artspace project. (Disclaimer: My daughter, Amanda Thompson, is COCA's education coordinator. Even without my adoration for Amanda, I would believe Artspace is the kind of project Tallahassee ought to pursue.)

The project, aiming to begin construction by 2010, is two-pronged. One half would be an affordable-housing complex of 50 apartments built by Artspace Inc., a Minneapolis nonprofit company that has built 21 similar complexes in 13 states. The other part of the project would be an "arts incubator," operated by COCA. The arts incubator would provide rehearsal, performance and studio space for dance troupes, theater groups, painters, sculphups8 v(a)8(ey, j)14.509498 0 TD0.0108 Tc0.0051 Tw byte anA(ar spac)-3.1(haste)-6.3()9.foundte3()9.sutepp fort(e ate)-8(3()9.n)e)-8(eed(e te)-8(r both comor)-5(ponete)-8(tst

"There's no denying the arts have economic value," said Michael Parker, the city's director of economic development. "But it's a little more amorphous to count."

Yet the same argument can be made for our government and education. Their worth is not simply in countable dollars. It's in the character they provide the community. It's a character that has made Leon County's population the most educated in the state and has kept our economy stable. It's a character that attracts new companies that seek a "brainpower" climate. It's a character that makes this an attractive place to live.

Artspace would be a great addition to our character — and a solid step toward Gaines Street redevelopment.

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