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Cultural magnet Arts on Gaines is moving forward

By Peggy Brady
MY VIEW

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Tallahassee is making big things happen. Not overnight, but rather because of those who put in years of important planning, who set possibilities in motion through the purchase of land to develop an area strategically.


By situating local cultural development in the context of other strategies and priorities, looking for complementary purposes and areas of confluence, the Arts on Gaines is on its way.

▼ ADVERTISEMENT ▼ A bridge between the campuses of Florida A&M and Florida State and the Capitol downtown district, the Arts on Gaines project would include shops and restaurants, and a large, unique creative center that would be home to the internationally renowned Boys' Choir of Tallahassee and the Tallahassee Ballet, and provide much-needed space for at least 23 other local performing-arts organizations.

A flexible small theater space where film, live theater or musical concerts are always on the marquee would be just a part of a visitor's experience. You could watch as dancers, actors or singers rehearse for their next show or as artists paint their next masterpieces.

The magic behind the creation of sets and costumes would be revealed when you see inside the commercial scene shop. Affordable live/work housing would be integral to the project, and with that would come a neighborhood-sized grocery store right next door.

A mixed-use development that brings regular 18-hour traffic to the area, the Arts on Gaines project is a partnership among local businesses, a citizens' committee

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Join representatives of the Council on Culture & Arts from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m. Tuesday at Chez Pierre, 1215 Thomasville Road, to learn more about the Arts on Gaines and meet one of the executives of Artspace.

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and a creative community with thriving indigenous visual, literary and performing-arts organizations, both commercial and nonprofit. Local-government staff and elected officials have offered their expertise and countless hours of advice as the project has taken shape.

Local architects and contractors would bring the project out of the ground. They could be led by Artspace Projects Inc., the nation's leading nonprofit developer of affordable arts spaces. Artspace has developed 18 such projects around the country, all of which are fully funded when open and financially self-sustaining.

In his June 15 column, Associate Editor Bill Berlow pointed out the importance of incorporating green technology in the plans for Gaines Street. Artspace's projects include promoting sustainable policies that encourage downtown greening and storm-water "best management" practices such as green roofs. It can bring that experience to the Arts on Gaines as well.

I have been asked what is the biggest obstacle standing in the way of this project? My answer is "cynicism."

As a community, we need to believe we *can* be successful in order to take the risks necessary to be successful. Through clear and agreed-on aims and objectives we can translate past disappointments and expectations into renewed hopes and aspirations that are achievable through good planning, economy and cooperation. A "can do" attitude will go further than knee-jerk cynicism.

With private investment leading the way, grass-roots support at all levels and a developer with the experience to achieve the unique goals of the project, the Arts on Gaines can be the catalyst to developing the chain of arts character that has already begun.

From the marvelous FSU Master Craftsman program anchoring the west end of the Gaines Street corridor, to the active and eclectic Railroad Square Arts Park bustling with local artists and artisans, to the small businesses investing in the future of Gaines by being part of its present, to the Johns Building site becoming a state-of-the-art performing arts center, to the inspirational plans for Cascades Park on the east end, Gaines Street is on its way. Success will breed success.

The Arts on Gaines kicks into gear this week with the launch of a housing and market survey. The data collected will dictate the number of units and level of pricing and provide information for other interested developers in what the current and near-future market is for this area.

Potential users of the creative center will also provide information on the sizes of rehearsal, meeting and storage spaces they would use. Local businesses that know the value of locating near an active arts and cultural district will want to participate as well so adequate space can be included.

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The housing/market survey is one of the last steps before entering a contract with Artspace to develop the project over the next three to four years. It is not a done deal; there is much work left for us to do. The Arts on Gaines is an opportunity. Let's be successful together.

Peggy Brady is director of the Council on Culture & Arts (formerly known as the Cultural Resources Commission). Contact her at peggy@cocanet.org or at (850) 224-2500.

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