

# Mill Valley launches public art program



Sharon Valentino, left, chair of the Mill Valley Arts Commission, former chair Teresa Rea, center, and Jenny Rogers, the city's art and recreation director, are leading an effort to bring more art to public spaces. At rear, a mural by local artist Zio Ziegler embellishes the downtown movie theater. (Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)

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A fiber art piece decorates a utility box outside Once Around arts and crafts store in Mill Valley. (Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)

Sculptures, stylized art benches, painted and decorated little libraries and more are part of a new public art program underway in Mill Valley.

After a year of development, the program has received a thumbs-up from the City Council. Organizers are working on getting new artwork ready for installation this spring.

“Now we are at the fun part,” said Jenny Rogers, the city art and recreation director, who is managing the project.

Rogers said the city’s arts commissioners, who pitched the program, will have a joint meeting in November with the parks and recreation commission to discuss potential sites for the public art pieces.

“We want to engage the community,” she said. “We want to talk to people about what they love about art and what they love about their communities and neighborhoods.”

That way, city officials could determine what types of artwork would best match each selected neighborhood and site, she said.

To start, the program will focus on five categories: sculptures, paint boxes, art benches, little libraries and outdoor recreation sites.

The paint boxes project would “beautify” utility boxes owned by the city and Pacific Gas and Electric Co., such as one in front of Park Elementary School on East Blithedale Avenue.

“We hope to involve the children in part of the design,” said Sharon Valentino, chair of the arts commission, adding that the idea is to “enhance the experience of living in Mill Valley.”

One idea for the art benches would be to have donors purchase the benches to be dedicated in memoriam at city parks and open spaces.

The little libraries are already featured in Mill Valley at the book exchange boxes in neighborhoods around town. The plan is to add a larger network and decorate them with art. This project is in collaboration with the Mill Valley Public Library.

The first project to be considered for the outdoor recreation piece is a ping-pong table that would feature a mural. Rogers said this could expand to murals at the city skate park, or at a practice tennis wall, and other recreation spaces.

Once an inventory of all the public art pieces is compiled, Valentino said, organizers hope to create a map for tours and school field trips.

The program is an outgrowth of the city’s public arts policy, which provides guidelines for artwork on city property.

Teresa Rea, a metal sculptor and former chair of the city arts commission, worked to get that policy approved last year.

“I think part of the inspiration for it was that much art is inspired by nature and Mill Valley is endowed with spectacular physical setting,” she said.

She said the city has a long history with art, and with art in public places.

A few examples include works at City Hall, such as the stained glass by John Leighton in 1981 and the Tidal Stone by Alan Shepp in 1982.

There are granite sculptures and benches by Dick O’Hanlon at the city library. There is a mosaic sculpture at the bus stop at Miller and Sunnyside avenues, and the mural on the wall of CineArts at Sequoia theater by local artist Zio Ziegler.

“It’s a joy to contribute to the public sphere,” Ziegler said.

What separates public art from museum art is that “it’s no tickets required,” he said.

“It effectively decontextualizes the art,” he said. “It allows people to engage in a neutral way. It’s a wonderful thing.”

The City Council members agree.

“I love how (the program leaders) have been able to integrate art into what we already have here in Mill Valley,” said Mayor Jessica Sloan.

“I think this goes back to our heritage in Mill Valley,” Councilman Jim Wickham said.

The project has a \$22,000 starting budget. Rogers said organizers will be raising money to get matching funds, and that the city will be feeding the project budget annually.

Rea said, “When we succeed in implementing this, there will be moments of joy and inspiration and magic and color and shape and form that each citizen will be able to take part in throughout the town.”



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