

Penn Theater to benefit from grant funds

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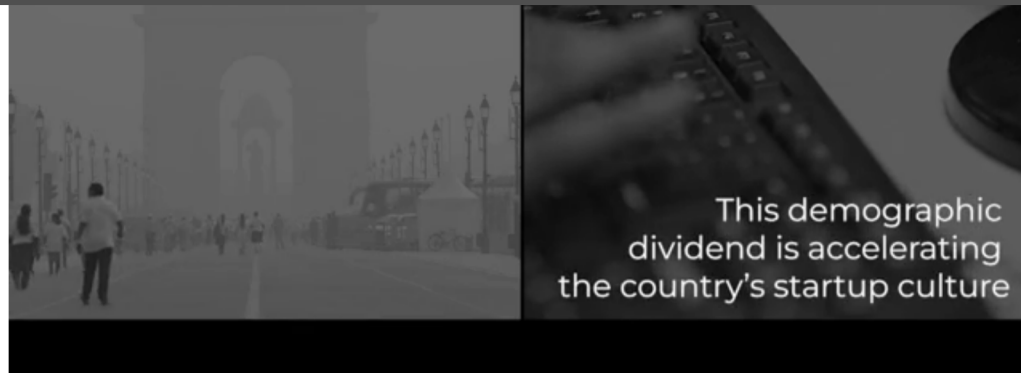


Karl Blischke, executive director of the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, speaks at a news conference on Saturday morning, Sept. 30, in front of the Penn Theater in downtown Butler. Shane Potter/Butler Eagle

Pa. arts council picks Butler Cultural District as a recipient

Just one year from the launch of the Butler Cultural District concept in downtown Butler, those in charge of the initiative have secured significant state funding for the project.

Representatives of the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts participated in a news conference on Saturday morning, Sept. 30, in front of the Penn Theater just before the start of the Butler Fall Festival.



Karl Blischke, executive director of the 57-year-old council, said the Butler Cultural District project has been named a recipient in the Creative Communities program, which grants up to \$25,000 per year for four years to selected projects across the state.

He said a cultural district will bring quality of life to the city, retain residents, and attract investment and visitors.

“It’s a really strong idea with really strong community partnerships,” Blischke said of the fledgling cultural district.

Sarah Merritt, director of the council’s Creative Communities and Creative Economies, said she will continue to assist the Butler Cultural District project by tracking grants on the state and national level, connecting new and existing programs in the cultural district with consultants, and providing advice based on her background in arts-based economic development.

She said 18 communities were chosen to receive the Creative Communities grants out of 220 applicants.

“We recognize that communities know best what they need to be doing, so we support what they identify as their project,” Merritt said.

She said members of Butler Rotary Club PM, who are at the helm of the cultural district project, will have the opportunity to network with other programs using Creative Communities grant funds.

Merritt said the Rotary must report its progress and expenditures to her department on a quarterly basis as she works with them on the cultural district.

“I’ll be back here quite often,” she said. “We are really excited to be coming into this program. The work going on in this community is wonderful.”

Butler Mayor Bob Dandoy said he is thrilled about the grant funds from the state arts council.

“I think it’s an indicator of people’s belief in this community,” he said. “You’re going to see a dramatic and exciting return on that investment.”

Dandoy, who is the city’s liaison to the Rotary’s cultural district committee, envisions a cultural district with diverse artists and performers in multiple venues in town.

“Certainly, the Penn Theater is going to be an integral part of Main Street,” he said.

The theater is in the late stages of being renovated after being closed for decades and even condemned by the city council at one point.

During the news conference, the sidewalk in front of the Penn Theater was decorated with a dramatic rendition of the comedy and tragedy masks by Erika Lalita Thurkins of Sylph Art Studios, of the Buffalo, N.Y., area.

Then, Leslie Osche, project manager for the cultural district and secretary of the Butler Rotary Club PM, and Thurkins moved to North Washington Street, where Thurkins had painted the outlines of more than 30 whimsical images on the sidewalks in front of Emily Brittain School and the Butler YMCA.

Children were invited to grab a piece of brightly colored chalk and color in the images.

Osche, who is also county commissioners' chairwoman, said when the rain fades the chalk, they can be colored in again by Emily Brittain students and day care clients at the YMCA.

The chalk art is a sort of pilot program the Rotary hopes will take off and expand to other parts of the city, she said.

"We'll see what kind of interest we can generate by decorating these sidewalks," she said.



Leslie Osche, project manager for the Butler Cultural District and secretary of the Butler Rotary Club PM, speaks at a news conference Saturday morning, Sept. 30, in front of the Penn Theater on Main Street in Butler as chalk artist Erika Lalita Thurkins decorates the sidewalk. Shane Potter/Butler Eagle



Butler Mayor Bob Dandoy speaks at a news conference Saturday, Sept. 30, in front of the Penn Theater on Main Street. Shane Potter/Butler Eagle



Leslie Osche, project manager for the Butler Cultural District and secretary of the Butler Rotary Club PM, speaks at a news conference on Saturday morning, Sept. 30, in front of the Penn Theater on Main Street on the progress of the Butler Cultural District. Shane Potter/Butler Eagle



Art work by Erika Lalita Thurkins, a professional chalk artist, on the sidewalk in front of the Penn Theater on Main Street added color to a news conference held there Saturday, Sept. 30, on the progress of the Butler Cultural District. Shane Potter/Butler Eagle



Erika Lalita Thurkins, a professional chalk artist, outlined figures in front of the Butler YMCA and Emily Brittain Elementary School on North Washington Street for children to color in with chalk. Shane Potter/Butler Eagle