

Arts center session draws a big crowd  
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CHATHAM-At similar presentations in Buffalo and Chicago, 40 people showed up to hear how Artspace could transform vacant commercial buildings into places for artists of every stripe to live, work and do business.

In Chatham, however, the crowd at the high school auditorium Wednesday night, October 26, numbered at least 140.

Artspace, a Minneapolis-based not-for-profit group, was in town to gauge public support for, and offer expertise on, the transformation of the old Columbia Box mill into a center for the industrial arts powered by renewable energy.

The group has secured financing, grants, and marketing strategies to keep arts centers afloat across the country, combining affordable living space for artists with offices and storefronts for for-profit tenants paying market value.

"Wow," said Chris Velasco, Artspace's vice president for consulting and new projects. "I did not predict this kind of turnout."

He and a colleague had met previously with Jody Rael, president of Kling Magnetics, who purchased the vacant, sprawling mill complex next to his business years ago and envisions turning it into Solaqua Power & Art.

Mr. Rael took the stage first Wednesday with his six-string banjo, opening with his own take on "This Little Light of Mine."

"All around Solaqua, I'm gonna let it shine," he sang, referring to his plan to harness solar and water power to create hydrogen used to fire kilns and torches and whatever else the craftsmen and students might need.

Launching a brief history of the project, he recalled offering to buy part of the mill for his own use, but the company wouldn't subdivide.

Mr. Rael came to realize, he said, that the 100,000-square-foot "white elephant" with towering ceilings and open spaces is perfect for making art.

And with the Stony Kill flowing over the mill's dam, he was inspired to incorporate cutting edge technology for renewable energy.

"It won't be this magic little black box that powers your car and you can't understand it," said Mr. Rael of the hydrogen system powering Solaqua, which might also include an inn, theater, brew pub and office and retail space. "You'll feel it."

Bringing the public to places where artists work is part of Artspace's mission, which began a quarter-century ago in the Twin Cities.

The group formed to give painters, performers, musicians, and others affordable places to live and work, and it wound up saving abandoned buildings and revitalizing blighted urban neighborhoods in the process.

After an initial project, said Mr. Velasco from the stage, "the artists came in and when they finished with their space, they finished the rest of the building and then they went outside. Any time of day or night, you'd find people doing something interesting and it brought people downtown."

Businesses that wanted to be near creative people soon followed, he said, but all the activity and beautification hurt the very people who chased the rats away as the rents got

too high for artists and their families.

Realizing it needed to tackle projects that provided affordable spaces on a permanent basis, Artspace went to work on a vacant 167,000-square-foot molasses factory in the ghost town that was downtown St. Paul.

The \$7 million project got off the ground, said Mr. Velasco, thanks to plenty of homework. The group discovered, for example, that it could secure real estate tax credits and sell them to big for-profit companies that needed them. The group also finds little known grants and incentives and relies in part on philanthropy, "turning over every stone."

And Artspace is devoted to market research and analyses of a project's building site, financing, concept and leadership.

The group recognized a small theater couldn't pay the bills, said Mr. Velasco, but renting to a coffee shop and other tenants makes it happen: "The overall building in Artspace's model must break even. If you create self-sustaining economic engines, then you create lasting communities."

That's what happened in downtown St. Paul, where a population of literally 50 people in 1987 grew to 5,000 people by 1995. With that came a reduction in the area's vacancy rate from 90% to 10%, said Mr. Velasco.

The city put the building's value a few years ago at \$24 million (Artspace also pays taxes on all of its projects).

But 52 artists are still living at the molasses factory, where Artspace leases them 1,750-square-foot units for just \$664 a month, while similar units across the street rent for more than twice that.

"They say what they love most is not the \$664 a month, it's being around other creative people," said Mr. Velasco, who showed slides of projects ranging from an ornate Masonic hall in Minneapolis to a battered warehouse in Seattle.

It's also beneficial for the people in Artspace buildings to live where they work, he said, because they get an opportunity to display and sell their art without the constraints of showing at a fancy gallery.

The same thing could happen here at Solaqua, said Mr. Velasco, who also met this week with area artists for their input.

"It's impossible for us to imagine what would happen if we took your creative people and put them in this place," he said.

And economically, said Mr. Velasco, "It turns out art is a great investment." He said this country's arts world had a \$134 billion economic impact in 2001, while U.S./China trade generated \$125 billion.

Furthermore, he said, every dollar invested in the arts generates an \$8 return (a sports stadium, for example, is a dollar for every dollar).

"These kinds of places are destinations," said Mr. Velasco.

He encouraged the audience to get involved.

"When you say, 'we're Chatham, not Minneapolis,'" he said. "I'll tell you it's about creativity and leadership."

Whether Artspace takes on the Solaqua project remains to be seen-it only participates when asked and it may decline to get involved. But Mr. Velasco envisioned Mr. Rael sitting down and doing his homework and fine-tuning his plans with the Chatham community.

"Artspace can't do a project like this the way it needs to be done," he said. "It can only be done by a movement."

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