

Officials hope murals will decrease crime, boost tourism in Jewett City

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GRISWOLD — Imagine driving down Main Street in Jewett City and seeing a field of sunflowers as you glance out your car window. That image may soon be a reality as local officials move forward on plans to decorate the borough with an array of sunflower-themed murals.

The Griswold Economic Development Commission, which has been instrumental in the town's rebranding as the "Sunflower Capital of New England," has been tackling the project as an unusual means to boost local business. Representatives from a local nonprofit spoke to the commission Wednesday about not only the economic impact, but also the social effect of bringing arts into a community.

According to a recent study, 34 percent of arts tourism is by non-local attendees, and each will spend roughly \$25.77 in town, Wendy Burry, executive director of the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition, said.

Burry referenced temporary art installations in New York City and Detroit that have brought millions of dollars in additional tourism revenue to the respective towns. Permanent installations, like murals, she said offer a similar effect. In Westerly and Pawcatuck, worldwide mural painting organization Walldogs brought the Bricks and Murals project to the community as part of a revitalization effort.

As a result of the roughly \$160,000 project, 15 buildings were painted with historic scenes in the downtown Westerly and Pawcatuck areas. Festivals and restaurant events focused on the new art installations drew thousands to the area, though the economic impact of the September project has yet to be calculated, Burry said, it stands to be impressive.

But the impact doesn't stop at the dollar sign. In communities that "embrace the arts," students are three times more likely to reach high achievement and are 44 percent less likely to use drugs, Bury said. In Griswold, which has been hit hard by the opioid crisis, officials are hopeful the murals in the downtown area will have an impact on crime rates.

Artist Faith Satterfield, who has completed six renderings of possible murals for the commission, said she has seen the social impact "on the ground level."

"A neighborhood's attitude can change overnight. I've seen it firsthand in communities where I've painted murals. People in the neighborhoods have said to me one day 'why are you doing that, it's going to get tagged.' But then the next day, they come around and realize the beauty," Satterfield, a childhood Griswold resident, said. "It's investing in your neighborhoods. It grants people a sense of pride."

Tom Giard, chairman of the Economic Development Commission, said he has heard from several Jewett City building owners who have expressed interest in their properties being painted. And though funding for the project has yet to be secured, Giard said he sees the project moving along in the near future.



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