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Public gets to speak out on mural

Wednesday forum planned

By MICHAEL TERAULT
Recorder Staff

GREENFIELD — The public will be able to have its say on the merits of a controversial mural planned for the downtown at a special forum next week at the Greenfield High School.

The forum will be held Wednesday at 7 p.m. in the high school cafeteria. Town Manager Norman E. Thidemann will moderate.

The forum is intended to provide a greater sense of the mural as being a community project and to allay any concerns people may have about the project. People at the forum will have the opportunity to comment on the mural's design, color scheme and on the appropriateness of its location, according to Selectmen's Chairman John F. Merrigan.

The planned mural would be painted on the east wall of the Borofsky Block, overlooking the Veterans Memorial Mall next to the police station.

"Because the mural is meant to be a celebration, a commemoration of Greenfield's history, I think in a certain sense, it's lovely," mural proponent Rebekka Tippens of Colrain said of the planned forum. "This first piece of public art in Greenfield is getting its first public discussion ... Hopefully, it'll be done in a constructive way."

Merrigan said he saw no problem with inviting the public to comment on the mural's artistic merits. "If it's obnoxious in its colors, I would think that people have that right to speak to that. I'm not advocating censorship. If it's something that's offensive, or too bright in its color scheme, I think people have the right for that kind of input," Merrigan said.

"At least people will have a

chance to vent their concerns," Merrigan said.

No binding decisions that would affect the fate of the mural would come out of the forum, Merrigan said Friday. No votes would be taken.

But if it became obvious there was overwhelming opposition to the mural, "common sense" might dictate that the mural proposal should be withdrawn or substantially changed, Merrigan said.

"If there's a major outcry, maybe they'll rethink their project," Merrigan said.

If, on the other hand, it turns out that the majority of people at the forum favor the mural, the selectmen will not attempt to stand in its way, Merrigan said. But if a clear majority opposes it, the board may feel compelled to go on record as being against it as well, Merrigan said. The selectmen have raised concerns about the mural in the past weeks, although Selectman Peter A. Ruggeri has said he supports it.

Any attempts by the board to stop the mural project legally, through such mechanisms as a court injunction or an appeal of the building inspector's approval, will most likely be put on the "back burner" for the time being, Merrigan said.

Merrigan said the idea to have a forum came about as a compromise between town officials with concerns about the mural and the mural's proponents.

The mural is a project of the Colrain-based Institute for Cultural Understanding, which is headed by Tippens. She said that a few other Pioneer Valley residents are involved in the institute, which seeks to promote interaction between cultures through artistic enterprises.

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Mural

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The institute is in the process of incorporating.

The Traprock Peace Center of Deerfield is serving as financial sponsor of the mural project by virtue of its tax-exempt status for accepting donations, according to Traprock Executive Director Jim Perkins.

Traprock has been serving as an intermediary between Greenfield officials and Tippens, Thidemann said.

Tippens hired muralist Janet Braun-Reinitz of Brooklyn, N.Y., to paint the mural, which would depict historical buildings and scenes in Greenfield.

The mural project has gotten bogged down recently in legal and zoning issues. Selectmen Monday directed Town Attorney Edward P. Smith to research whether the proposed mural is technically a sign. If it is a sign, it could be held subject to

the town's sign regulations. Since the mural would be larger than is allowed it would require a special permit from the town zoning board.

Smith plans to present his written opinion at Tuesday's selectmen's meeting.

But Merrigan said Friday that the sign issue is almost a moot point now. In fact, the selectmen may drop the sign issue altogether and instead focus on the forum as a way of ensuring that the public interest is served, Merrigan said.

Merrigan also said that a panel should be set up to digest the comments raised in the forum and to issue a statement of opinion on the mural. Such a panel could include people involved with the mural and people knowledgeable of the arts who would be neutral on the mural

issue. He said that local art teachers may be ideal for such a panel.

ZBA scored

Merrigan also criticized the town zoning board for weighing in on the issue of whether the mural should be considered a sign.

ZBA Chairman Roy Cowdrey asked his fellow board members Thursday night if they thought the mural could be considered a sign. Since it appeared to him that the selectmen were going to hand the mural issue to them for a special permit decision, Cowdrey reasoned the selectmen should be told up-front whether it would be worth their while to send the mural proponents through the zoning process.

The members agreed with Building Inspector Bruce Austin's earlier

determination, that the mural isn't a sign. Therefore, they felt, a special permit from their board would not be necessary.

"We have not asked the zoning board for an opinion. We have asked the town attorney who works for us for an opinion," Merrigan said.

He said the zoning board was "premature" to jump on the mural issue, since there had not been any formal move on the selectmen's part to send the mural proponents to the zoning board.

"We were looking to have the law interpreted, not implemented. We may not even get to that point. No one's talked to the zoning board ... We certainly have not made any decisions to go to the zoning board or to court," Merrigan said.