

More funding for public art

The revelation that city government has been dramatically shortchanging its public art program by not providing the level of funding required by a city ordinance should prompt better support for public art, not less.

Unfortunately, it's not clear whether the City Council has the wisdom to make good on its commitment now that its error has been discovered. The irrefutable value of the program, however, should compel stronger support by the city. The community's significant support for public art and the economic and esthetic gains propelled by such art since the city's renaissance took hold show why.

Under an ordinance adopted during former mayor Bob Corker's administration, city government should have been channeling 1 percent of its capital improvements budget toward public art since 2004. Instead, it's allocated just \$100,000 per year to the program since the initial appropriation of \$1.2 million.

Critical clause ignored

The city is obligated by the ordinance's language to contribute either \$100,000 or 1 percent of the capital improvements budget, "whichever is greater." Had the latter clause been observed, the city would have put substantially more into the program the last four years, from \$319,000 in 2005 to \$535,000 last year.

The original funding commitment recognized the correct perspective of public art as an investment in the city's core infrastructure. There is good reason for that.

Public art, indoors and outdoors, contributes in myriad ways to the prosperity of the city and its citizens' well-being. It enhances the city's esthetic value, public enjoyment and quality of life. It bolsters tourism. And it is as essential to economic development as good schools, streets, sewers, hospitals and other civic amenities.

Broad value of public art

Just ask Volkswagen executives and other business leaders. In selecting the city for its new plant, VW officials explicitly cited the city's

Riverfront development, which highlights public art, and our larger cultural renaissance and public appreciation for art. They also specifically asked that the ceremony announcing their plans be held in the atrium of the new Hunter Museum annex.

Yet when city officials discovered the other day that they had been giving the public art budget just \$100,000 — an amount barely sufficient to handle just the installation and maintenance of the city's growing collection of public art — several commissioners suggested they would consider cutting funding altogether in view of other budget needs. That would be lamentably shortsighted and narrow-minded.

The city's shoestring support doesn't even cover the salary of the program's director, but so far it has helped leverage donations from individuals and the Lyndhurst and Benwood Foundations for both program support and scores of acquisitions for indoor and outdoor art.

Reducing funding would immediately jeopardize that essential support. Indeed, the patience of private supporters — whose contributions total \$1.4 million this year alone — has already been tested. If the city doesn't increase its arts funding, it stands to lose its arts program altogether.

The city would be the loser all around. Public art not only enhances the city's economic prospects. It also has attracted strong public support.

Three popular programs

Three privately funded programs have proved particularly popular, in part because they involved popular voting by area citizens for selecting the art to be acquired. These programs include:

Art in Public Places, which has put outdoor sculptures in the Chattanooga Zoo, Renaissance Park, Miller Plaza, Main Street, First Street, Ross's Landing, the Aquarium and, beginning just last week, along the Riverwalk. Other works include the brick masonry art on downtown sidewalks, and the gallery of paintings and other art in City Hall,

The Chattanooga Hotel and many other community parks and centers.

Art in Neighborhoods, which has placed sculptures in the Urban Art Garden at the south entrance of the Brainerd Tunnels and is funding a pending installation in Hixson in cooperation with the Friends of Hixson.

The national conference of the Mid-South Sculpture Alliance and Chicago Sculpture International, which met three weeks ago in Chattanooga, and which initiated placement of the year-long exhibit of 20 sculptures now placed along the Riverwalk.

Next Tuesday, the first two of the four large sculptures that will grace the access to the Market Street Bridge — two at each end — will be installed at the south end of the bridge. Unlike most of the program's sculptures, this set of four, "The Four Seasons," may attract wide notice.

Art a bridge to future

Each will be a nine-foot-tall bronze of a nude female in a style reminiscent of classic ancient

sculpture, such as that seen in Nashville's prominent replica of the Greek Parthenon erected in the 4th century, BC, in Athens. Purchase of the sculptures, which will be placed on 5-foot-high pedestals, came under a contract awarded by former Mayor Corker's administration in 2004 to complete the 21st Century Riverfront development.

The larger benefit of the city's public art program goes well beyond enriching public life and honing appreciation of the arts among our own residents. It also helps Chattanooga compete with the many cities that generously fund arts as a means of broadening their appeal to their citizens and new residents and businesses.

Our problem is not that we put too much in public art. It is that we put far too little. Most of the peer cities with which we aspire to compete do far more. If the City Council wants to lead Chattanooga to a better future, it must improve funding for public art.