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Panel plans to improve Heritage District's art

By Mary Ellen Fresquez

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Western Powerline Park is home to beautiful examples of public art that set the Heritage District apart. MARY ELLEN FRESQUEZ

The 98th Arizona Town Hall in May in Tucson concluded that increased emphasis is required to recognize the economic importance of art and culture in our communities.

Closer to home, Gilbert's General Plan states that the downtown Heritage District is a potential center for arts and culture serving the East Valley.

Many of the actions defined in the plan have begun. But more attention will be re-



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quired, and the Redevelopment Commission will be one of several public entities involved in that process.

The Redevelopment Commission issued design guidelines last year that ensure the architecture, furniture palette and signage all contribute to the district's sense of place.

In reality, these features create the framework for the artistic charm of downtown. When you drive into our downtown, the historical buildings, the unique street signs, light poles and benches, and the bold use of neon lights tell you that you have arrived in a special place. We will continue to review and recommend artistic endeavors that make our district distinctive.

In the field of public art (defined as art accessible to the public, free and frequently involving the public in its selection and creation), the Heritage District already includes some wonderful examples — the water features and inscriptions at the Western Powerline Park and the Water Tower Plaza, as well as the photo gallery at the plaza entry near the restored pump house.

Visitors can appreciate the artistic nature of these venues while learning about the town's agricultural past. Other opportunities to enjoy art in downtown are a result of the private sector's investment in the arts.

These include murals at Oregano's, Gilbert Self Storage and the east entrance to Pink Zebra Boutique. There's also the beautiful nostalgic mural covering the interior south wall of Joe's Real BBQ. Locally produced artwork hangs on the walls of Bergies Coffee Roast House and Romeo's Euro Cafe as well as a changing photo exhibition at Art Intersection.

There have been discussions of a privately funded monthly art walk beginning

Finally, within the Heritage District is Hale Centre Theatre, which wins awards annually for its excellence in the performing arts.

Schools and non-profits also play an important role in art. This past May, Gilbert High School conducted its second annual art walk utilizing four downtown venues. Works by students, alumni and faculty were exhibited.

Another art walk is among the Gilbert Days events planned for November. The Historical Museum has monuments commemorating citizens who have served in past military conflicts. The historical significance of the monuments creates a reverential space that gives our community the perfect place for Memorial Day and other events.

With these opportunities to expose ourselves to art and culture in the Heritage District, there is still more that we can do. Because art plays an important part in the economic health of our town, the Redevelopment Commission will continue to encourage both public and private investment.

We will revisit the General Plan and the Town Council's strategic initiatives often to ensure that the actions of the commission are in sync with those documents.

Among its other responsibilities, this commission will help create synergies within the creative community of Gilbert, resulting in a more vibrant downtown.

Mary Ellen Fresquez is vice chair of the town Redevelopment Commission.