

Group studying feasibility of Freeman Arts/Earth Center

by Jeremy Waltner | Posted: Tuesday, July 1, 2014 6:12 pm

“What Freeman really needs is a performing arts center.”

How many people have uttered those words, or a variation thereof, over the years? Community choirs, church concerts, summer theater, school plays, the Schmeckfest musical, traveling acts coming through this arts-centered vista certainly make Freeman a candidate for something better than it currently has — gymnasiums designed for sports — and many know it.

John Koch sure does.

In fact, since learning about this community through marriage some 40 years ago and moving here in 2011, Koch has been cautiously optimistic that Freeman will eventually get that performing arts center and has said quietly that he would do his level best in working toward that end.

He is.

Today, Koch is a driving force behind a comprehensive project that will determine, not only if the community can support a performing arts center, but also complementary projects that focus on education and research and a center housing commercial greenhouses and other specialty products.

The Freeman Arts/Earth Center, as it is being called, is a three-legged stool that draws on this community’s strengths, says Koch — that is, a strong tradition of the performing arts, a broad range of agricultural assets and a deep understanding of the traditions on which the Freeman community has been built.

“There’s hardly anything here that’s new,” said Koch. “It’s just a reconfiguration of the way we do things that draws on the strengths of this community and its strong heritage.”

Indeed, he says, Freeman is uniquely suited as a community in which something like this could exist because many who live and work here share knowledge of, and appreciation for, creativity and self-sufficiency in the agricultural and arts world.

Koch references the popular line from the movie “Field of Dreams” — “If you build it they will come” — and then spins it.

“In this case,” he says, “the people are already here.”

First steps

The ideal end game is the creation and construction of a facility located in Freeman that would include all three aspects of the Freeman Arts/Earth Center — an area for performance, an area for research and education and an area for commercial gardens, food and other retail products that would provide the ongoing financial stability required to cash flow such a facility.

Koch and others working on the project are a long way from reaching that point.

First, they must determine if something like that is even possible.

“Until you do a significant amount of planning, you can’t make a logical decision whether you’re even going to move forward,” says Koch. “You put together a team that allows you to look at these questions seriously, and then you make a determination if this is a risk that is rational and worth taking.”

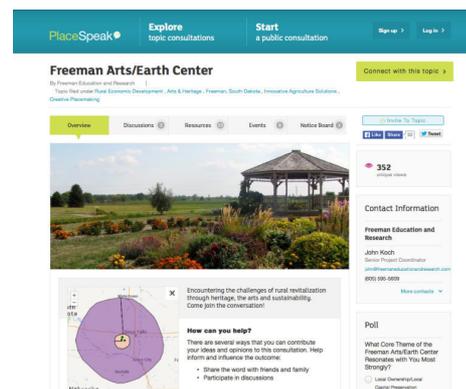
That behind-the-scenes effort has been underway since last fall and, in addition to Koch, has included participation from a number of key players, including community native and 2007 Freeman Academy graduate Josh Hofer.

In fact, it was Hofer’s return to the community last fall and his interest in working toward an Our Town grant through the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) that jumpstarted this project in the first place.

Koch calls it “a happy confluence of events.”

“This all grew out of Josh coming back with an opportunity and the chance to be competitive in seeking out this grant,” he said. “That was the enabler.”

Hofer was working toward his master’s degree in arts administration at Indiana University last year when he learned about the Our Town grant, which is designed to aid arts and economic development in small communities — “the places that are typically overlooked,” Hofer said. “This is for development of the unseen.”



Spreading The Word

One of the ways those working with the Freeman Arts/Earth Center project are getting the word out is through the website PlaceSpeak, which details the project’s specifics. The page can be found by going to placespeak.com, then clicking on the “Explore” button and then typing “Freeman Arts Earth Center” into the search bar.

Hofer thought immediately of his hometown and all those assets Koch talked about — the emphasis on fine arts and agriculture and doing it yourself and doing it all well.

“Just look at the core values of this community,” Hofer said. “This is about developing what’s already here.”

The possible grant through Our Town, a \$150,000 request that would go a long way in funding resource people and research, was presented to the Freeman City Council last December in what was the first public mention of the effort that has since been ongoing. At the meeting, Koch asked the council to support the effort; while no city funds were being sought, Koch told officials that a city endorsement would be viewed favorably on the grant application.

The council approved the endorsement — and agreed to be the official grant applicant — at its next meeting.

“We’re trying to work in a collaborative way,” he told the council at the December meeting. “The pieces that need to fit to be competitive are starting to fit. We are farther down the road than we could have imagined three or four months ago.”

There is no word yet on whether the grant will come through in the amount requested, or even a portion of it, but Koch and Hofer are hopeful.

“We’ve been told that is a very real possibility,” Hofer said of the chance that the NEA will allocate only some of the \$150,000 requested. Those working with the Freeman Arts/Earth Center project expect to receive notification one way or another sometime in July.

Even if the grant doesn’t come through, Hofer says the research will be ongoing.

“The energy we have going gives me hope that that will continue even if the grant doesn’t happen,” he said. “The question is, are you in touch with the right people? And I would not underestimate the people who have their eye on Freeman right now.

“My hope is that carries the project forward (regardless of whether the grant is awarded).”

Outside involvement

When Hofer mentions “the people who have an eye on Freeman,” he’s talking about a partnership that extends beyond the Freeman community and has brought this project to life in a big way, even as it unfolds quietly, behind the scenes.

Koch acknowledges that, too, and with enthusiasm.

“There are a lot of people interested in what we’re doing here,” he says. “A lot of people have taken hold of this.”

One of the key players is James Schwinn, co-founder of the Boston & Western Corporation, a Kimball-based business that works with innovation and leadership in rural economic development on a national scale.

Schwinn, who works alongside Charlie Randall Jr., has been a key player from the beginning and is involved in the project management aspect of the Freeman Arts/Earth Center. In short, he’s the guy who will determine if the facility can be a self-sustaining entity.

“Before we can move forward,” Koch says, “we need to make sure this is viable financially.”

Schwinn’s commitment to the project thus far has been as strong as anyone’s; Koch and Hofer both say Schwinn sees in Freeman what they themselves see — “A collaborative appreciation within the community for its heritage,” says Koch. “Freeman has a uniqueness that may allow this project to be successful.”

The University of Arkansas’ Community Design Center is involved, too, working on the architectural aspects of the project. How big does it need to be? Where should it be located? How are the different aspects of the center integrated? The University of Arkansas’ involvement also includes its Center for Agriculture and Rural Sustainability, which focuses on increasing sustainability and profitability in rural settings.

“These are unbelievable people,” says Hofer. “When people with common values — whether it’s John Koch or me returning to my home community or others like James Schwinn — come together, exciting things happen.

“We’re creating energy from within and we’re pushing that energy outward.”

Community involvement

Up until now, the majority of the work has been done quietly: visits from Schwinn and a visit to the folks from Arkansas; email exchanges and phone calls. There have also been a number of meetings for local community residents who have taken an interest in the project through their churches and/or other organizations — Rural Revival, the Freeman Community Development Corporation and members of the business community, for example.

Koch says that has given the project a good start.

But for the Freeman Arts/Earth Center to really take hold, more need to become involved.

That effort is now underway through the formation of task forces to be made up of local community residents and outside consultants who relate to their charge. Each group will study the ins and outs, logistics and feasibility of the different elements of the Freeman Arts/Earth Center, and then determine the functionality and viability of that area.

While it's no small task, breaking it down methodically and intentionally makes a large-scale project more manageable.

"The task forces subdivide all of this into more manageable gulps," says Koch.

A total of seven task forces will be needed to study different elements of the Freeman Arts/Earth Center, everything from architecture to greenhouse products that may be grown to marketing to financial modeling for the overall project. Koch says four to six community residents will be needed for each.

"We'll take whoever raises their hand," he says. "But don't kid yourself; we're going to go out and get people.

"That's one of the advantages we have over other communities," Koch continues. "We have people who have worked in these areas — sustainable agriculture and theater — for years and years and years."

Giving the project some structure is Freeman Education and Research (FEAR), a newly established 501(c)(3) made up of Koch, Hofer, Dean Dreessen, Lyle Preheim and Will Ortman. FEAR's primary focus is to develop strategies for the development of educational programming related to the performing arts, and how to apply research to the arts/agricultural model being used for the project.

Freeman Education and Research, Inc., also gives what is otherwise an arbitrary project some footing.

"Unless you're something, you're nothing," Koch says. "This group's function is helping serve as a steering committee."

Once the other task forces get formed, all will work independently, but with the collective objective of determining whether the Freeman Arts/Earth Center is possible.

"In the final analysis," Koch says, "you have to have three areas (education and research, the performing arts, and the earth center and commercial greenhouse) that will need to work together."

One other way leaders in this project are drumming up interest is through social media and an online presence. Hofer has developed a Freeman Arts/Earth Center page on Facebook and given the project a detailed explanation on PlaceSpeak, an online platform that allows communities and organizations to share information about their projects and drive dialogue.

Timeline, etc.

"This is a constant game of problem-solving," Koch says of this enormous undertaking that is short on specifics but long on ideas. "I can't tell you how many times we have come up with different timelines."

All of that is sure to continue in the weeks and months to come.

Koch hopes that, by the end of this year or early next, the task forces will have completed their work and can come together for a hard look at whether the Freeman Arts/Earth Center takes the next step — that is, working toward construction and implementation.

He is realistic.

"We could go through all of this, and it could absolutely crash," he says. "If and when we get to the 'yes' point, we still need to find a way to finance it."

As for the when, where and how much will it cost — the three biggest questions the at-large public likely has — those answers are still part of the unknown.

Koch doesn't even take a guess as to where such a facility might be located, but says it will be determined using public input and broader consultation from the outside.

Could construction of the Freeman Arts/Earth Center be underway by 2016? It's possible, he says.

As for the price tag, that's a big variable and contingent on many different moving parts. Koch says initial estimates indicate a facility of this nature could not be built for anything less than \$15 million.

That's a big number for what would be a big project in a small community.

But even through the uncertainty and uphill battles of it all, Koch maintains the vision that has led him to believe that if ever there was a community that could, in fact, get something like this done, it's Freeman.

"This is all about doing it right in the planning phase," Koch says. "As long as we do the planning right, in a couple of years, this is realistic."