

Freeman Considering \$15M Arts/Earth Center

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FREEMAN — There's a lot of FEAR in this Hutchinson County town of 1,300 residents. That's FEAR, as in Freeman Education and Research, a 501c3 non-profit corporation.

The organization's proposed \$15 million arts/earth center is moving forward with the determination of possible sites and the project's feasibility. The combined arts center and greenhouse would seek to stimulate economic development, using local agriculture, arts and heritage.

Project organizers are in the midst of a feasibility study, using a \$150,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), said FEAR board chairman John Koch.

"We are looking financially if this all makes sense and whether we would have the needed cash flow," Koch said. "The NEA grant is being used to cover expenses for planning and for our architect, Steve Luoni from the University of Arkansas. The grant started last September and runs for a year, so we're working on that timeline."

NEA chairwoman Jane Chu visited Freeman last September, providing important national visibility, Koch said. In turn, the FEAR board may seek additional NEA funding and has submitted for other grants, he added.

"I'm not saying the (NEA) money in itself wasn't important, but it also brought a credibility that was critical," Koch said. "It gave us an audience, and it got us attention."

FEAR project organizers have been in contact with landowners whose property could host the center, Koch said. "We're looking at criteria and developing an idea of who may be interested in selling property," he said.

The board hasn't made any final decisions but is working to narrow the list of sites, Koch said. He anticipates the site selection would be made by this spring, possibly as early as February.

According to the project's report, the greenhouse and arts center would ideally be located at one site and possibly in the same facility. The site should offer easy access to U.S. Highway 81, running along Freeman's east side, for marketing tourism, crafts and agricultural products.

In terms of attracting tourists, the FEAR report pointed to the large influx of visitors at nearby Yankton. The report noted the creation of a Freeman heritage trail could attract at least some of the one million visitors annually at Gavins Point Dam and Lewis and Clark Lake.

The Freeman arts/earth center's for-profit greenhouse would cover a minimum 1.25 acres, Koch said. The greenhouse would produce value-added products and help support the non-profit arts center. However, the arts center - a 400-seat theater and a 120-seat recital hall and movie house — would need to be self-sustaining.

The plan calls for sharing the greenhouse's excess energy with the performing arts center, Koch said. The shared energy would cut costs and provide a green environment, he added.

A Joint Effort

While the FEAR board members organize the project, the planning process has drawn together community members divided into task forces.

Board member Josh Hofer manages the different forms of communication that keep the planning elements flowing smoothly.

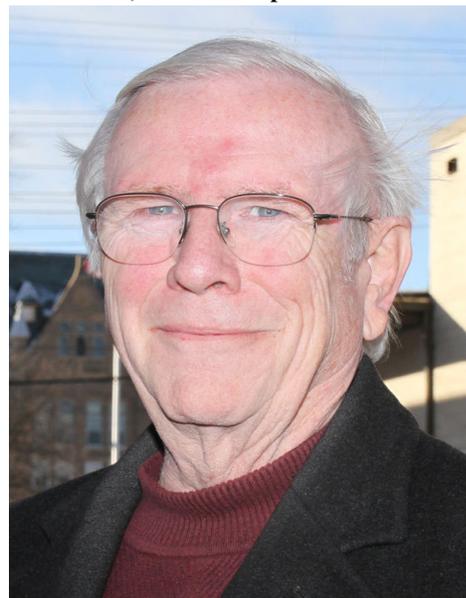
"This includes emails and coordination for our core constituents that number close to 150 interested parties," he said. "I also coordinate the task forces of around 50 participants, log meetings and report to the larger group, as well as keep informed the advisors of the planning process paid for by the National Endowment for the Arts grant."

During the first three months of the grant, the FEAR project has continued to grow through the use of social media and online interaction sites such as PlaceSpeak, Hofer said.

"The company's PlaceSpeak platform has seen over 800 hits in the past half year and gained over 350 followers on Facebook," he said.

Social media provide greatly needed interaction with the larger public, Hofer said.

"Tools like these tie together the energy of a rural population that otherwise might struggle to have enough energy to sustain such a project," he said. "PlaceSpeak's ideals ... reinforce what we are trying to do in Freeman -- build something based on the ideals and



Koch

values already in place in an area.”

The task force ideas include pop-up restaurants, support from the state’s cultural festivals and a food truck or temporary restaurant market model. Discussion was also held on marketing organic produce, greenhouse agriculture and techniques such as hydroponics and aquaponics.

The group is also studying the Amana colonies’ model for production and marketing of home-made products, Koch said. A January trip is planned to the Iowa colonies.

“We are working with stewardship of the land and sustainability,” he said. “More and more colleges are working with sustainability and the marketing of local products. We have Mennonite colleges, and there are others, that offer environmental science and are looking at new processes.”

Freeman provides an ideal location for such research and production, Koch said.

“For a rural community, it makes a tremendous amount of sense,” he said. “We are also drawing on our Mennonite heritage. Freeman has taken on the role of a mini-regional center, and the unifying factors are the churches and our Mennonite traditions.”

Offering New Ideas

The FEAR task forces are also looking at ways of marketing traditional foods and crafts by local residents, Koch said. The effort would not only provide additional income but also preserve a vanishing heritage, he said.

So far, around 50 individuals and groups have been identified as possible participants for a “Freeman Made” label that could be cooperatively marketed. The effort could use local retailers for showcasing such products in their stores.

“We can promote our heritage, and we can add jobs and vitality,” he said.

The arts and tourism effort can draw on Freeman’s strong tradition of year-round events, Koch said. “I counted 39 events throughout this year, with audiences ranging from 50 to 750,” he said.

Current offerings include the Schmeckfest musical, the Subscription Series, community theater, the Ghost Light Players, Freeman Academy, Freeman Public Schools, Swiss Choral Society, the Freeman Children’s Choir and recitals.

The current arts foundation is necessary to even consider a performing arts center, Koch said.

“You need critical mass. If it’s not there, it ain’t gonna happen in a town of 1,300,” he said. “You need those elements to come together in a sense. Right now, we are holding our arts performances in gymnasiums across town. This is a challenge to build our quality of life.”

The new arts/earth center would take advantage of existing local cultural/heritage, economic/commercial, arts and educational resources. Those resources include the Prairie Arboretum, Heritage Hall Museum and Archives, Main Street and Highway 81 businesses, Freeman Public Schools and Freeman Academy.

However, the FEAR center would also reach out to form partnerships with colleges and universities, vocational training centers and other public and private entities.

FEAR organizers are considering a Main Street venue, such as a barn or revitalized building, to provide an additional downtown hub. The venue could draw those with an interest in local heritage and history to Freeman’s commercial areas, serve as a workshop or gallery, and provide a distribution or business center for “Freeman Made” products.

While much work remains, Koch said he is pleased with the project’s direction.

“We are pretty happy where we are,” he said. “We are having dialogue and engaging conversation. It’s at a point where we have people talking about these options.”

Now, the focus has become defining which shape the project should take, Hofer said.

“The process now becomes self-reflection on a detailed level,” he said. “What does the community need? And how do we augment our perceived strengths?”

The community has shown an enthusiasm for considering new ideas and things, Hofer said.

“We are excited to continue driving this project forward and continue seeing these possibilities develop,” he said.

For more information, check out the Freeman Earth/Arts Center on Facebook.

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