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Arts group takes ownership of former Kress Building

Vision, purpose for old building is to create new home for creativity with Studio Arts Center

ALTOONA - As downtown continues to grow, a new arts organization is looking to help spur creativity and development opportunities for local and visiting artists.

The Altoona Renaissance Team, known to the community as ArtsAltoona, has a vision to change the former Kress Department Store at 1406 11th Avenue into a new studio and gallery space, tentatively called the Studio Arts Center.

The first floor will offer a communal gallery and shop for artists to rent space and show their works. The existing second and third floors will offer artists studio space for lease.

By supporting an easy co-working studio space, it is ArtsAltoona's hope to bring new, exciting artistic opportunities to visitors and residents. One-on-one workshops can be offered in this space. Rural artists can also easily collaborate with other people - something now usually done out of garages and workshops at their homes.

"The area already has a very strong arts presence; our goal is to support, expand and build upon that rich foundation for the purpose of enhancing the economy of our community by making it a destination," said Donna Gority, chairperson of the ArtsAltoona movement. Gority is a former Blair County Commissioner. Although technically retired, Gority has used her connections, time, and county experience to continue to be a full-time champion for economic development in our region.

"When I am in Harrisburg, I love going to the Millworks to visit the artist studios, the gallery and the shop selling the artists' work. The food is wonderful and the menu is constantly changing at their locally sourced restaurant. This is one of the models we are planning to follow for our repurposing of the Kress building and I am very excited to be part of bringing this to Altoona," said Gority.

Through a generous donation of the building and property from Todd Eichelberger, ArtsAltoona is able to make this vision happen.

The building is in various stages of disrepair, however the hope is to save the brick facade, the steel structure, and other important historic details. In addition to this work, discussions about including another floor on the top of the building have also taken place. Initial analysis has

indicated this will not pose a problem according to local engineering firms that have looked at the building.

Architecture students from Penn State University's University Park campus will be visiting the building as a part of the Sustainable Communities Collaborative. The students will create concept plans for the new building after touring downtown Altoona and will make sure important benchmarks such as parking, artists collaboration, accessibility, energy consumption and saving, and historic renovation work will be included in this semester-long project.

"We have identified a couple of minor problems with the building such as some asbestos and water damage, but we have been assured that the building's brick and steel structure can accommodate the reconstruction as we envision it," said Ken Decker, building chairperson and a constant innovator for ArtsAltoona. "Our hope is to make this building a cultural destination by providing studio space and galleries for working artists and an activities center for creative workshops. We also hope to add an additional floor for a farm-to-table restaurant, including a rooftop biergarten."

"This combination of an Arts and Culture oriented center along with a food and beverage provider has been incredibly successful for other communities and has led to tremendous business expansion for those communities. We want to replicate their success," said Decker. Decker has been working on this project since January 2017 and also works full-time as a financial consultant with NEXT Financial Group Inc.

ArtsAltoona will hold an unveiling of the Studio Arts Center on Tuesday, January 9, 2018, at 3 p.m. Due to expected cold weather, the announcement will take place at the Allegheny Ballet Company's fourth floor dance studio at 1415 11th Ave., Ste 2. Views from this facility will give the media and guests a chance to comfortably see the building from a unique perspective. Reception immediately to follow at Railroad City Brewing Company from 3:30-4 p.m.

Supporting Altoona and Blair County with the Studio Arts Center is a critical part of the mission for ArtsAltoona. The arts are the heart and soul of our community. By fostering access to arts, creativity and professional development for all artists and creatives in our area, at all skill levels and from all walks of life, we encourage a more open, diverse, and engaging interaction with our community, for residents and visitors alike.

This group has also initiated local projects such as a website and social media presence as ArtsAltoona.org, developed to bring artists together and to bring area events for the arts, culture, and history of our area into one location. Plans are also in the works for pop-up art gallery events in various neighborhoods in the area and an after school arts program which will start later this month. Information regarding activities coming up can be accessed from the ArtsAltoona Facebook page or through their weekly newsletter.

About ArtsAltoona

This non-profit aims to strengthen Altoona and Blair County as a center for educational, cultural and social activity and to enhance its reputation as an exciting place to live and visit.

ArtsAltoona wants children to see gateway opportunities in their own communities and for businesses to know our area is worth investing in. Support for artists and creatives in our region is essential to Altoona's revitalization, sense of place, and commitment to a brighter future.

Through collaboration and community conversation, ArtsAltoona can achieve innovative resources and programming that serve the Greater Altoona Area.

www.artsaltoona.org