

MINUTES – Norwalk Arts Commission
March 10, 2015

Present: Tony Velez, Becki Christopherson, Chris Bradley, Lynn Massey, Jeff Price, Susan Wallerstein, Julyen Norman, Diane Jellerette

Absent: Kathy Hebert, Sophia Gevas,

Guests: Maribeth Becker, Sherelle Harris, Diane Albano

Public Comment

- *Diane Albano, Norwalk Public Schools, Program Assistant for Art & Music* gave an overview of the annual student art show (opens May 19th this year) and the student art gallery on the 3rd floor at City Hall, dedicated to former Superintendent Ralph Sloane. In the absence of a district administrator for the arts, Diane has provided leadership for these projects. She described some of the areas for potential improvement and possible change. Members of the Arts Commission expressed their interest in assisting the school system with this effort including but not limited to relocating some of the existing artwork, creating print and digital tools for people to find the artwork, changing the way pieces are selected for the gallery, e.g., number, method. Susan suggested the K-8 art teachers could provide input at their upcoming professional development day. Diane Albano and Chris Bradley agreed to attend and use this opportunity. Chris Bradley, Diane Jellerette and Lynn Massey volunteered to work with Diane Albano on this project and provide an update at next meeting. Additional discussion about expanding the K-8 art teachers professional development activities to include music next year. Becki offered to follow up with Diane on this possibility.
- *Sherelle Harris, Board of Education and Assistant Director of Norwalk Public Library.* Chris invited Sherelle to share some thoughts and concerns she has heard about the Justin Gruelle WPA mural, *Steamboat Days on the Mississippi*, based on one of Mark Twain's memoirs. People have told her they feel it's a little offensive to be on display in City Hall in 2015. She explained that while the artwork itself is very well done, and depicts the truth for a different place and time it could invoke the feelings of racism today, whether or not this is the intended message. The artwork implies to some that Norwalk is stuck in a time when blacks are seen as "less-than." She provided several examples of art she has in her home explaining that artwork like this can be balanced with something more positive since art is intended to inspire. In response to a question, she also explained her view of the difference between visual imagery and written word i.e., paintings in public places versus books in libraries. After Sherelle finished speaking, members and guests continued the discussion, sharing thoughts, feelings, suggestions and opinions:
 - History and art go hand in hand, we can't deny either of them, that painting becomes a teaching moment.
 - WPA docents have included opportunities to talk about race, class and gender in a number of paintings and hope to convene a community conversation about these issues in the future.
 - This is not just an artistic or intellectual issue but also powerfully emotional.
 - It's difficult when you come from a background of discrimination to face it every day, but on the other hand, don't we need to face up to the history?

- WPA murals stand alone as a historical collection in spite of their imperfections. If nothing else these WPA murals say, “we are not perfect, we have done some really bad things, let’s learn from this and not do it again.”
- Sometimes the arts provide opportunities to have difficult conversations. This mural has hung in city hall since 1988 in a significantly more prominent place than it is now. Other than recent conversations, not aware of any discussion in the last 25 years.
- Public spaces convey powerful symbolic messages about priorities and values – lots of visual symbolism.
- Possible to commission new WPA murals as Norwalk 2.0 has commissioned modern versions of the murals?
- Since Commission is looking at redesigning the signage already, perhaps there could be contextual information added during this process.
- Sometimes it is good to listen without responding.
- How can we think holistically about this building? At a city level, there is no plan for how we want the city to develop, and this is reflected in the environment in City Hall as well.

Project Updates

- *Mayor’s Gallery* - Jeff and Tony outlined the plan with permanent installation (enlargements of historical Norwalk postcards donated by Artists’ Market) on the curved walls at the entrance, then framed homosote panels to more easily display diverse and changing selection of art from the community. This solution is easy to install and can be removed easily for painting. Artist Market can give 40% discount, total budget exclusive of hanging it, to produce panels, is \$1650. Discussion about use of frames, need to paint walls, security, and upcoming exhibit of student work created in collaboration with Center for Contemporary Printmaking. Those present agreed to defer discussion about curator. Chris made to approve an amount not to exceed \$2,000; passed unanimously.
- *Public Art Inventory & Policy* – Julyen said all of the data is in the database and he is finalizing policy draft. Discussion about number of print copies of inventory, posting on website, and follow up meeting with department heads.

Meeting adjourned at 10:05 AM