Written by By Rick Abasta Sun Correspondent
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Concept aimed at revitalizing downtown

The Coal Avenue Commons kick-off celebration brought together business owners, city workers, citizens, and other stakeholders May 1 in a discussion of ongoing efforts to revitalize downtown Gallup through funding from Our Town, the National Endowment for the Arts’ creative placemaking grants program.

The grant funding supports projects that incorporate arts, culture, and design into community projects. Advancing the local economy, community aesthetics, and social outcomes is the NEA’s goal.

El Morro Theatre the crown jewel of downtown Gallup, was the site of the event.

Jen Hughes, director of design and creative placemaking at the National Endowment for the Arts, joined by video from Washington, D.C.

She said the transformative process is going to be exciting.

“First off, I want to extend hearty congratulations to the city of Gallup and gallupARTS for securing an Our Town award from the NEA,” Hughes said.

The NEA, as an independent federal agency, funds, promotes and strengthens the creative capacity of communities by providing Americans with diverse opportunities for arts participation.

Hughes said placing arts at the table with land use, transportation, economic development, education, housing, infrastructure, and public safety strategies are a few of the advantages of the Our Town grant.

“Ultimately, Our Town grants are intended to seed catalytic work that will drive long-term social, physical and economic improvements with the goal of benefitting local and regional residents,” Hughes said.

The challenge is to imagine how Coal Avenue can become a walkable, welcoming place where culture, community, and commerce thrive. Artists have a unique ability to push the boundaries of what we think is possible and render exceptional visions into reality, she said.

“Gallup is home to a remarkable group of silversmiths, weavers, carvers, painters, sculptors, writers, and more,” Hughes said. “I encourage you to leverage the creative talents of Gallup to boldly think about the ways that you might strengthen your community.”

Implementing unconventional thinking to drive long-term social and physical change is the key, she added.

Maryann Ustick, Gallup’s city manager, welcomed partners to the kick-off and said the Coal Avenue Commons will be a catalyst for the revitalization of downtown.

“A downtown is the heart of any city and it is also our front door,” Ustick said.

How downtown looks and feels is important because it will entice community members and visitors to return for the experience.

Ustick’s experience in downtown revitalization projects with other cities has provided her with key lessons and firsthand knowledge about the positive attributes of creative placemaking, a term used by the NEA to mean the use of arts and culture to develop and improve a neighborhood, street, or community.

She said the 4 P’s of success for downtown revitalization are patience, preservation, participation, and partnerships.

Patience is important because downtown revitalization is a long-term commitment and Ustick said Gallup’s vision is outlined in the downtown master plan, replete with an arts and cultural district plan.

Preservation provides historical context and uniqueness for the public, which today craves authenticity. Gallup’s unique gift is arts and the American Indian culture is an experience that visitors can’t get anywhere else.

Participation is the hardest because getting the buy-in of property owners, businesses and an entire community can be a time consuming process. Political will and community support are crucial.

Partnerships are important because the local government does not have the resources to revitalize downtown on its own. Partnerships are important to sustain and grow the revitalization.

Ustick expressed appreciation for the NEA, McCune Charitable Foundation, McKinley County, Gallup Business Improvement District, New Mexico Arts, New Mexico Main Street, Gallup Main Street, City of Gallup, and gallupARTS.

Downtown Through History

Evan Williams, deputy director for Northwest New Mexico County of Governments, said the organization serves 72 rural and small towns in Cibola, McKinley and San Juan counties.

“Downtown Gallup has been a hub for social and commercial activities since the railroad landed and has been through many periodic transformations,” he said.

The horse-and-buggy, coal mining, invention of automobiles, acquisition of Interstate 40, and the construction of Rio West Mall are a few of the changes in Gallup’s history that initially helped to create its downtown.

In 1985, Gallup was one of the first cities in New Mexico to become a Main Street town.

“We were actually one of the first communities in New Mexico to complete a metropolitan redevelopment plan,” Williams said. “Gallup has been an innovator of downtown redevelopment since its inception.”

The downtown redevelopment plan was completed in 2002 and involved a design charrette with business owners and stakeholders.

The results of those efforts can be seen with the courthouse, veterans’ memorial, Gallup Walkway, expansion of the El Morro into a performing arts center, and more.

Guest speaker Greg Esser of the Creative Placemaking Institute at Arizona State University said Phoenix’s Roosevelt Row was a revitalization project that he worked on for more than 20 years.

He shared a number of photos depicting vacant lots that were transformed through community participation in projects like the one-acre Valley of the Sunflowers project, which had high school students planting sunflowers for harvest.

The seeds were harvested, pressed and used as fuel for a hybrid solar biofuel car that they created in their classrooms. It took five years to get city permission for the students to plant seeds over a two-year period.

“Creative placemaking is really about assets that exist in every community and those are artists,” Esser said. “Artists are people who tend to see things where others don’t. They use imagination to see a better future. They have creativity and skill and they are incredibly underutilized assets.”

For more information, visit www.coalavenuecommons.com .

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