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TOP STORY

Beautification

Businesses, volunteers work to enhance the beauty of Hallettsville

By Elena Anita Watts | ewatts@vicad.com Apr 21, 2019 Updated Apr 21, 2019



Friends of Hallettsville Revitalization's Mieko Mahi, center, and Harley Fisk, right, invite Hallettsville resident L.C. Davis to a sidewalk chalk-coloring event at Hallet Oak Gallery.

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Through beautification projects, economic incentives for business owners and a genuine sense of shared pride in their hometown, Hallettsville volunteers and city officials are enhancing the charm of their downtown and strengthening local businesses.

An art gallery, a movie theater, hardware stores, ladies' clothing boutiques, a coffee house and restaurants, among other establishments in historic downtown Hallettsville, depend on local consumers and tourism to keep their doors open. Every year, Fiddlers' Frolics attracts 15,000 people from 30 states during its four-day event, the State Championship 42 Domino Tournament attracts more than 400 visitors and the Kolache Festival attracts thousands to the small city. While events help with the tourism, having a steady stream of visitors who shop, dine and stay is a goal most cities work toward.

"Hallettsville is an attractive city, and the city wants to make sure it stays that way and gets stronger," said Jason Cozza, the city secretary/administrator for Hallettsville. "The people in Hallettsville work well together, they are good people with good churches, and they are proud of their town."

Hallet Oak Foundation, a nonprofit doing business as Hallet Oak Gallery and Friends of Hallettsville Downtown Revitalization, is helping maintain the city's historic charm while advancing its cultural appeal and attractiveness. The gallery is an arts, performance and learning center run by volunteers. Friends of Hallettsville Downtown Revitalization promotes public art and beautification projects outside the gallery.

A gentleman visiting the gallery wanted to know Hallettsville's secret for being "so together and so beautiful," said Mieko Mahi, a facilitator of the arts who opened the Hallet Oak Gallery in 2015. He had just moved to a ranch in another small community, wanted to see improvements and asked for her advice.

"I told him that if you want change, you have to do it," Mahi said. "If you want trash picked up, you have to be seen picking it up; you have to do it."

This is the type of work volunteers are doing in Hallettsville, and the city and the county are helping, too.

The Friends of Hallettsville Downtown Revitalization has created a beautification committee that has completed various projects around town. The committee adopted U.S. 77, where volunteers pulled weeds and picked up trash along the road. They asked the county to mow and remove leaves and trash around the courthouse regularly, and the county hired a groundskeeper to maintain the property on a daily

basis. They added flowerpots at the four corners of the Lavaca County Courthouse and removed chewing gum from paved bricks around the historic downtown square with a screwdriver.

They asked the city to pressure-wash the sidewalks downtown once a year and regularly maintain downtown streets, curbs and sidewalks in front of businesses, and the city agreed. The city also hired additional help to keep public property and easements pristine for the benefit of businesses and residents. When the committee pursued removal of graffiti on the wall of a historic building facing an alleyway, the owner responded by commissioning a local artist to paint a mural. And artists have turned unsightly or unnoticed concrete forms around town into canvases for their attractive artwork.

At a City Council meeting in February, Harley Fisk, a volunteer at Hallet Oak Gallery, asked the city to add a sentence to the city website indicating that “the city treats everyone with dignity and respect and does not discriminate on any basis.” Most people would explore a city thoroughly before moving or locating a business there, and their research likely would include visiting the city website, Fisk said.

Mahi has lived in Hallettsville for 12 years, and during that time, art has become more integral to the community, she said. In addition to the offerings provided by the gallery she operates, the KC Hall displays art, and an original painting by Dalhart Windberg hangs in Peoples State Bank.

The Hallet Oak Gallery lost money its first year as a for-profit enterprise. The second year, the gallery became a nonprofit and broke even. However, the community has profited in many ways. The gallery displays and sells art and leases space at a low rate to artists who teach classes. The gallery also earns revenue by charging for art, music and other cultural events and sponsoring membership and donation drives. Mahi also began renting the historic building as a venue for events and meetings at a nonprofit rate.

“We are surviving with help from small businesses and individuals who support the arts,” Mahi said.

The business incentives program offered by the Hallettsville Economic Corporation helped Mahi get the gallery off the ground. The city gave her \$2,000 to purchase fixtures and furniture.

“It doesn’t sound like much, but when you start a business and you’re wondering where it is going to come from month to month, you’re worrying about money, it helps a lot,” Mahi said.

Every year, the economic development corporation sets aside money, currently \$70,000, to provide grants to local businesses, said Cozza. The grants are available on a first-come, first-serve basis, and the amounts are based on a percentage of the projects. The maximum grant is \$10,000, and each business is limited to one per year. To qualify, businesses must make an investment and create or retain jobs in the city.

The owners of Hallettsville Hardware used a grant last year to renovate the facade of their building. The 55-year-old family-owned business, which has occupied the downtown building for almost 30 years, also received a grant a few years ago to replace the roof.

Last year, David Nitsch and Gilbert Henneke received the maximum grant amount when they renovated a downtown building they co-own. As an investment, they renovated the space specifically for a home health agency wanting to open an office in town.

“It’s a good incentive – the grant didn’t make or break the project, but it made it more appealing,” Nitsch said. “(Hallettsville) appreciates that we help bring new people to town who frequent the nail shop next door, frequent lunch places and shop – about 20 to 30 people are affiliated with the business.”

Elena Anita Watts covers arts, culture and entertainment for the Victoria Advocate.

Elena Watts

Features Editor

“I’m glad to be reporting on the events that bring people in my hometown together for fun, culture, camaraderie and good causes.”