

'ROCKING AND ROLLING'

Fall River arts, culture plan will boost local economy

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Herald News Staff Reporter

FALL RIVER — “Artists eat.”

Who knew?

That bold statement was made by Mike O’Sullivan, the Fall River co-CEO of One SouthCoast Chamber.

O’Sullivan wasn’t being flip-
rant. His point was that artists,
as well as people who travel
to partake of art and cultural
shows and performances, tend
to spend money in local restau-
rants.

And that’s good news both
for small business owners and
overall, local economic develop-
ment.

“It fills the restaurants and
produces tax revenue,” he said.

O’Sullivan, who sits on
the steering committee of
Fall River Arts and Culture
Coalition, also known as
FRACC, said he’s optimistic
about an “arts and culture
plan” that’s been gathering
steam, especially during the
past eight months.

The final version, after
months of discussions and
Zoom open houses, will be pre-
sented in a public setting some-
time in September, O’Sullivan
said.

“We’re still trying to figure
out how this all fits together,”
he added.

The FRACC coalition,
which now has more than 50
members, was established in
March 2019 as a committee
of One SouthCoast Chamber.
Its goal has been to “create a
vibrant, inclusive and sustain-

able creative economy.”

Last October the group
hired Brookline-based arts
and cultural advisory firm
CivicMoxie LLC to devise a
strategy, or action plan, to help
revitalize the city — as part of
a collaborative effort involving
arts, culture and economic
development.

“It’s for the whole city, not
just downtown,” said Patti
Rego, who recently assumed
the role as district manager of

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A SouthCoast Spring Arts band concert was held outside in May across from Government Center in downtown Fall River.

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Viva Fall River, which promotes the same values and goals and operates out of the One SouthCoast Fall River building on Pocasset Street.

The chamber's nonprofit Bristol County Chamber Foundation acts as fiscal agent to both FRACC and Viva Fall River.

O'Sullivan says there possibly will be another two public meetings seeking input from building and restaurant owners; members of the state delegation representing Fall River; Mayor Paul Coogan; and municipal department heads.

"I'm very excited about where FRACC is heading," O'Sullivan said. "It's really, really rocking and rolling."

Susan Silberberg, founder and principal of CivicMoxie LLC, declined to discuss details of FRACC'S arts and culture plan in advance of its completion.

Silberberg stressed that her firm — which has provided urban-oriented planning strategies to other Bay State cities such as Boston, Worcester and Lowell and cities in other states including Michigan, Louisiana and Ohio — is there solely to provide ideas and information.

"It's not our plan," she said. "We provide support."

But Silberberg didn't hesitate to say she's been impressed with FRACC, its various participants as well as the city itself.

"Everything is unique in Fall River," she said. "You have a group of 60 civic leaders, residents, artists and non-profit groups all participating together, and that is extraordinary."

"The level of collaboration and cooperation is exceptional. It's an absolute joy," she added.

Silberberg says Fall River, in addition to an advantageous geographical location, has a rich history, an ethnically diverse population and "a vibrancy" that is exemplified by its food.

Fall River has long been known for its Portuguese restaurants and cuisine.

O'Sullivan said FRACC's contract with CivicMoxie expires in October.

He said the coalition

managed to raise more than \$100,000 in donations to hire CivicMoxie as well as to create the paid position of an arts director, which has since been filled by Fall River native Devon Torres.

Both O'Sullivan and fellow FRACC steering committee member Patrick Norton, who owns and operates Narrows Center for the Arts on Anawan Street, recently penned a letter on behalf of FRACC opposing the idea of a proposed public art policy and commission.

The proposal, which was submitted by a local nonprofit arts and entertainment group, is now being considered by two city council committees.

"Our goal is to operate independently," said Norton, referring to FRACC. "We've been trying to do this for 20 years, and the last thing we need is to have Fall River government get in the way. It's important that we get it right."

He said his Narrows Center for the Arts is proof that people from outside the city will come to Fall River if there's something going on that appeals to their senses.

Norton said 80 percent of the 40,000 people who came to the Narrows in 2019, mostly for live music shows, live outside a 15-mile radius of Fall River.

O'Sullivan, who originally hails from New Jersey, said that Fall River has a plethora of arts-oriented activities in addition to the Narrows Center for the Arts.

He cites the Children's Museum of Greater Fall River, Bristol Community College's Grimshaw-Gudewicz Art Gallery and Jacqueline Francisco, director of Fine and Performing Arts for Fall River Public Schools.

The key, O'Sullivan said, is collaboration.

O'Sullivan says arts and culture "can be an economic driver" for a city "just like education and health care."

"But some people need to be reminded of it every 30 seconds," he said.

O'Sullivan said he's still "150 percent sports" when it comes to his personal interests. But he said he's also come to realize the important role arts and culture play in the vitality and quality of life of a city.

"People who knew me 20, 30 years ago would say I'm nuts," he said. "I never would have thought I'd be an advocate for the arts."