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Everett hopes art will kick-start its downtown

By Lynn Thompson
Times Snohomish County reporter

As an arts teacher, Jane Meagher never had her own studio or even many opportunities to create artwork, except as examples for students.

Now she has a spacious corner storefront in downtown Everett, and although her lease is good for only six weeks, it's also free.

The city of Everett and the Arts Council of Snohomish County have teamed up to offer vacant downtown storefronts to working artists. It's part of the city's efforts to inject vitality into a downtown often deserted by nightfall and to bolster a business district struggling to draw shoppers away from regional malls.

Ultimately, the city hopes to lure artists from cities with more established gallery scenes such as Seattle, Bellevue and Kirkland, and to create, amid the old brick buildings that line Everett's historic center, a vibrant arts district of lofts, studios and gallery space.

"Creativity always begets energy, and that's just what a downtown needs," said Lanie McMullin, Everett's economic-development director.

Despite the sluggish economy, a number of mixed-use projects have broken ground over the past year. Taken together, they will add 300 apartment units downtown and are raising hopes the former mill town could have some of the 24-hour vibrancy of its more cosmopolitan cousin to the south.

"There are more cranes on our skyline than there've been in recent memory," said Kate Reardon, spokeswoman for the city. "That's amazing, given the economy."

Among the projects nearing completion is a four-story regional arts center. The building will provide gallery space and classrooms on the ground floor, and studio and affordable loft space for artists above.

The center is being built by the Arts Council, which will move its



MARK HARRISON / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Janet Wold's artwork includes her shoes. Her temporary studio is in downtown Everett.



MARK HARRISON / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Artist Jane Meagher shows her work with papier-mâché and other mixed media in her street-front studio gallery on Wetmore Avenue in Everett. She is among a group of artists to take up residence for six-week stints in one of seven downtown buildings.



MARK HARRISON / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Artist Janet Wold has a prime street-front location at the corner of Hewitt and Wetmore avenues in downtown Everett. The city hopes to lure artists from cities with more established gallery scenes to Everett's historic center.

Art in Great Spaces

Culminating exhibition
Sept. 29: 2829 Wetmore Ave., Everett

Arts Council

administrative offices to the new building.

of Snohomish County

Faded lettering on the white stucco building at the corner of Wetmore and Hewitt avenues speaks to the ghosts of businesses that have come and gone over the years.

The storefront has been a men's clothing store, a bank, a bookstore and a junk shop. It was sitting empty when the city and the Arts Council launched its Art in Great Spaces program in July.

Building owners donate the space to the artists. The Arts Council pays a stipend for insurance.

Meagher, a multimedia artist, is among the second group of artists — there are 13 in all — to take up residence for six-week stints in one of seven downtown buildings.

For Meagher, who usually travels from school to school as an artist-in-residence for the Washington State Arts Commission, the free studio space has been an unexpected gift.

"It's got giant plate-glass windows, light streams in," she said. "It's a beautiful place to work."

The generous amount of room also has inspired her current creation, an organic, inverted, treelike sculpture made of toilet-paper rolls and papier-mâché.

Passers-by have monitored the work's progress, offering their own interpretation, from tumbleweed to plumber's nightmare.

She said an elderly man recently suggested the title, "How government works."

Some longtime Everett residents have greeted the new art spaces with a mix of excitement and disbelief that there are art studios downtown.

"I thought, 'they're bringing art to Everett?' How wonderful is that?" said Frank Blish, 51, who has stopped by Meagher's studio several times and was disappointed to learn her stay is temporary.

"I wanted it to be forever," he said.

The experiment has proved successful for the buildings' owners as well.

Everett's economic-development director said the spaces have attracted two letters-of-intent from prospective business tenants. And one artist has decided to rent out her space when the program ends.

"It's been more successful than my wildest dreams," McMullin said.

Lynn Thompson: 206-464-8305 or lthompson@seattletimes.com

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