

Plans change for sculptures at East Peoria's Civic Plaza - Bandshell by Emser no longer in the works

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EAST PEORIA — The meeting broke up with an agreement to meet again over lunch in a week.

"I'll bring my checkbook," is what local sculptor Bob Emser remembers hearing 93-year-old philanthropist Peg Bahnfleth say more than three years ago.

The next meeting never took place.

Exceptionally civic-minded, Bahnfleth had agreed to donate a substantial amount of money to cover Emser's plan to sculpt a bandshell-like structure to be placed near the eastern tip of the new Civic Plaza, a triangular grassy expanse between the new City Hall and Fondulac District Library complex and Costco in the Levee District. Bahnfleth not only approved of the design, she loved it, Emser said. She died before she could write the check, though her heirs agreed to honor her wishes to make the donation.

Now, more than three years after her death, the \$250,000 Bahnfleth left as a legacy donation to the city she loved, is still around, unspent. The Civic Plaza remains undeveloped. And Emser and his bandshell have been scrubbed from the plans.

What happened?

"I don't know what happened," Emser said during a recent interview. "All I know is I never heard back from anybody."

"(The City Council) dropped the ball," said Commissioner Tim Jeffers. "In my view, the Emser piece was the biggest ball we have dropped in my nearly 10 years on the council."

Jane Bach-Brummitt, of East Peoria, Bahnfleth's niece and the executor of her estate, had a simple, if vague, explanation.

"There were concerns about where it was going," she explained. "We met with city officials and when they said they had decided to move in another direction, the family agreed we would be open to suggestions."

The new direction includes a peaceful landscaped space to be known as the Reading Garden. It will include a bronze life-sized statue of Bahnfleth and her husband by Georgia sculptor Greg Johnson.

The Reading Garden will occupy a 25-foot wide band of property on the east side of the building that runs from the sidewalk on Richland Street to the sidewalk on East Washington Street or the entire length of the library and City Council Chambers. Bahnfleth's donation will pay for completion of the garden and statue. The council voted last month to transfer the \$250,000 donation from a city account to the newly-formed East Peoria Community Foundation. The intention is for a Community Foundation capital campaign to raise more than \$2 million more to finish the development of the 3-acre parcel, a project that will include a large water fountain feature.

Bahnfleth was friends with Emser's mother, and as a fellow East Peorian had followed his artistic career with hometown pride. Emser, a graduate of East Peoria Community High School, Eureka College, Bradley University with a master's of fine arts degree, co-founded Peoria's Contemporary Arts Center in 1995. He has exhibited his sculptures on four continents, in seven countries and in 27 states in the United States. He has sculptures in many public spaces, including Lake Land College in Mattoon.

Bahnfleth was active in her community, serving on many boards, commissions and charities. Her obituary that ran July 7, 2013, said she was "a great volunteer and philanthropist to many local organizations supporting the arts." A former teacher, Bahnfleth left an estate worth more than \$5 million. She and her husband, Ray, who died in 2009, had no children.

Bahnfleth was eager to convey a piece of art to East Peoria, and the new, undeveloped Civic Plaza was an obvious spot for sculpture. At her suggestion, Emser designed a work that would be both artistic and functional — a 35-foot tall, curvy two-piece sculpture that would double as a piece of art and a bandshell.

"My feeling was it was pretty clear what (Bahnfleth) wanted," Emser said. "She loved the bandshell."

Bahnfleth's donation was given to the city on July 1, 2014, almost one year after she died. A story in the Journal Star on July 2 said the City Council "authorized the use of a \$250,000 gift from the estate of Peg Bahnfleth, for sculptor Bob Emser to create a large sculpture for the Civic Plaza."

Then the project went dormant. Jeffers said the bandshell concept gradually lost favor with city and library officials, some who balked at the pricetag for a single piece of sculpture, albeit a very large one. Even though it wasn't their money.

"The fabrication process was very complicated," Emser said. "I wasn't going to make any money on it."

Jeffers doesn't understand why the bandshell idea couldn't co-exist with the rest of the plans for the Civic Plaza.

"I don't know why the Emser piece couldn't still be a part of the changed plans," Jeffers said. "It was Peg's wish for the bandshell. And it was her money."

Emser thought Bahnfleth would be mortified by the notion of a statue of her and her husband in the newly designed Reading Garden.

"That wasn't Peg's idea," he said.

Bach-Brummitt disagreed.

"She enjoyed receiving kudos for her philanthropy," she said. "She liked for her actions to be acknowledged. She was an avid reader and the Reading Garden and statue will be Peg's legacy and most visible contribution to East Peoria."

Meanwhile, Emser has vowed to move on from the East Peoria bandshell project of which he, Bahnfleth and, at one time the East Peoria City Council, approved.

"It was very disappointing," Emser said. "But I'll get over it."

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