

East Peoria Civic Plaza moves away from philanthropist's plan

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EAST PEORIA - The notion that East Peoria philanthropist Peg Bahnfleth wanted a local sculptor to create a large piece of civic sculpture has been locked now for more than four years in the memories of two men who knew of her wishes firsthand - Commissioner Tim Jeffers and sculptor Bob Emser.

Now her wishes can be confirmed, and in her own words.

"Thank you for the telephone message Sat., March 16, 2013, regarding the proposed 'on the triangle (Civic Plaza)' bandshell (sculpture) in East Peoria of which you and I have talked several times," Bahnfleth wrote to Jeffers almost four years ago. "Bandshell may be the wrong terminology, but describes the essential thoughts of a multi-functioning structure and its accoutrements."

Bahnfleth, who was 93, died four months after she wrote the letter, but before she could make the donation for the bandshell in the still undeveloped Civic Plaza outside City Hall and the Fondulac District Public Library in the Levee District. Her heirs honored the verbal agreement and donated \$250,000 of her \$5 million estate for the sculpture that would have doubled as a functioning bandshell for concerts and gatherings. Bahnfleth selected Emser and his design, in part because she was friends with his mother, and had followed his successful artistic career with hometown pride.

But the project idled for two years. It re-emerged at a City Council meeting last year when the council approved a transfer of the money from the city to the newly formed East Peoria Community Foundation. By that point, Emser's 35-foot-tall, two-piece bandshell had been dropped from the conceptual plans.

"Ultimately as we looked at it we began to have concerns that the bandshell design would ultimately limit the utility, value and benefit to the city," City Attorney Dennis Triggs said Friday.

Paid consultant Daniel Weinbach and Partners, a landscape architectural firm from Chicago, created its own conceptual design of the Civic Plaza space. It was their expert advice that the bandshell did not comport to its integrated plan for the entire 3-acre Civic Plaza development, Triggs said.

There remained the issue of spending the \$250,000 Bahnfleth donation in a way that honors the donors. The Weinbach concept accomplishes that with its "Reading Garden," a 25-foot-wide band of property to run the length of the east side of the combined City Hall and library building on East Washington Street. The landscaped garden will include a bronze life-sized statue of Bahnfleth and her husband, Ray, by Georgia sculptor Greg Johnson. Other features on the initial plan included a performance pavilion with terraced seating, a large water feature, sculptures, an open multi-purpose lawn and other landscaping touches.

Bahnfleth's heirs have signed off on the Civic Plaza concept.

Total cost of the project is about \$2.5 million, of which about \$1 million already has been raised, Triggs said. The Bahnfleth legacy donation makes up about 10 percent of the total cost.

Je? ers maintains that the Emser bandshell that Peg Bahnfleth wanted could easily, and beneficially, co-exist with the rest of the plans for the plaza.

"Peg's gift should have been honored and if the family, with their gracious donation, or anyone else had other items (they wanted), they should have put up additional dollars" Je? ers said. "Not use Peg's."

Wrote Bahnfleth in 2013: "Thank you for following up on this projected activity. I'm really excited about my inclusion in East Peoria's progressive endeavors."

Triggs, who had Bahnfleth for a teacher when he was in third grade, had known her for most of his life. He called her smart, analytical and community minded and believes she would have supported the new plans for the plaza that honored her and her husband.

"Had she lived, I think she would have been open to alternative ways to honor her husband with plans with more staying power like the reading garden," Triggs said. "She never had an opportunity to consider alternatives for an integrated plan for the entire Civic Plaza."

Jeffers is resigned to the change of Bahnfleth's plans for the Civic Plaza. But that doesn't mean he's pleased.

"This whole saga still leaves me so sad, disappointed and angry at the same time," Je? ers said.

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