

FLORIDA TODAY

Arts in bloom

Turning old Eau Gallie into artists' colony gets boost

Piece by piece, the campaign to turn downtown Eau Gallie's historic district into an artists' colony is moving ahead with the growing potential for it to become a real plus for Brevard County.

More action came last week when the Brevard Cultural Alliance purchased an aging motel-turned-apartment complex that it will turn into its headquarters and live-and-work studios for artists.

Arts activists are calling it a huge step forward, saying it will draw more attention and energy to the area and continue building support for the project.

We've strongly backed the artists' colony idea since its inception several years ago because of possibilities to create new jobs and businesses, attract locals and tourists and generate tax revenue.

With buildings dating to the 1920s, antique shops and proximity to the Indian River Lagoon, it could become the next Cocoa Village or historic downtown Melbourne and blossom into a rejuvenation magnet.

The artists' colony, approved by Melbourne City Council in 2007, is a perfect fit, and the concept can do for Eau Gallie what it has done in two other Florida cities.

One is near downtown Sarasota, where more than 40 studios, galleries and restaurants thrive in the live oak-draped Towels Court artists' colony. The other is **Bradenton**, where a decade ago, artisans turned a blighted part of town into a vibrant rehabilitated area called the Village of the Arts.

Proponents are working on multiple fronts, including the partnership announced earlier this year between the Brevard Cultural Alliance and the Economic Development Commission of Florida's Space Coast.

Studies have shown that business growth and a thriving cultural scene are linked, with EDC officials saying more businesses come to communities where there is support for the arts.

That's why tax dollars the BCA spends to promote cultural events — which come mostly

from bed taxes paid by visitors who stay in local hotels — are well spent, generating an estimated return of \$27 for each buck spent on marketing, according to BCA officials.

Construction on the BCA's new half-acre "village" in Eau Gallie could take three to six months after which the nonprofit group will be ready for business.

"We are absolutely ecstatic," said Eau Gallie Arts District director Mary Wallis. "This is just another step towards the revitalization of the arts district. We're starting to see it all happen."

Yes we are, and it's why the effort deserves the community's support.



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Artistic flair. Alexandra Crooks of the Space Coast Ballet performs during the 2008 Fall for the Arts Premiere Party in Eau Gallie.

