

Greenspace gets \$115K grant, will host events this summer

By Mike Crowley Meadville Tribune

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The transformation of a vacant lot downtown into an arts-infused community greenspace will begin to take shape this summer thanks to a \$115,000 state grant.

A temporary stage will be installed on the site of the former Meadville Club, located at the corner of Market Street and Clinton Court, and while visitors enjoy events and activities over the summer, final design plans for the space will be completed, project coordinator Amara Geffen said Wednesday.

“I am very excited to be able to take this project to the next level,” she said. “We now can really truly make some things happen.”

The Arc Community Greenspace, a cooperative effort of The Arc of Crawford County, the city of Meadville and Geffen’s Art and Environment Initiative, was announced shortly after The Arc purchased the lot in late 2018. Since then, the project has won previous support through state and city grants totaling \$35,000 as well as as other sources. The vision for the space has evolved over the same time thanks to community input that built on initial efforts by Allegheny College students working under Geffen’s direction.

The latest grant from Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources was awarded to the city. A cooperation agreement between the city, The Arc and the Art and Environment Initiative is expected to be approved at Meadville City Council’s April 7 meeting.

Interim City Manager Gary Johnson said he's looking forward to taking advantage of the space once it's open for use.

“Our collaboration with The Arc and artist Amara Geffen has resulted in a fantastic opportunity for downtown Meadville,” he said. “I know that the resulting community green space will benefit the vitality of our community by providing a wonderful opportunity for families and visitors.”

Final design plans will be completed this year with the goal of bidding the project for construction next year or possibly 2023, according to Geffen. The completed project will feature an accessible walkway over Mill Run, a handicap-accessible parking space, stormwater management, sustainable landscaping, a performance stage, a pad for a seasonal restroom facility, and a project sign.

“The result,” according to a press release announcing the grant, “will be an inclusive community venue where Arc clients and members of the Meadville community can gather and form friendships while enjoying cultural activities in a natural environment.”

Developing those friendships will take a bit longer than originally expected due in part to the pandemic. Project organizers had hoped to install a temporary stage last year for a series of events such as the Second Saturday Night Live concert series and community movie nights. Instead, the trial run for the stage, which Geffen said will help in finalizing design details for the permanent structure, will take place this year with all of the necessary COVID-19 mitigation measures.

In addition to the pandemic, the complicated nature of the project itself and the process required to make it a reality have affected the timeline for completion.

“There are a lot of things we're trying to do and we started out not having any money to do any of those things,” Geffen said. Each round of grant funding takes a year, she added, and while work continues on design and construction she will be pursuing additional

support for the artistic elements that will make up the final phase of the project. These components, which have been central to the concept from the start, include murals and a roof over the stage that incorporates sculptural elements.

It's looking less likely that the final project will include uncovering a significant portion of Mill Run. The stream runs under the property and exposing part of it was part of early design concepts. At City Council's most recent meeting, then-City Manager Andy Walker said that engineers working on both the green space and rehabilitation plans for the Clinton Court bridge that runs alongside it had recommended against uncovering the stream.

If that were done, Walker said, "then you have to provide a crash barrier from the bridge, which significantly increases costs and safety concerns. I wouldn't expect there to be a proposal to 'daylight' the stream immediately adjacent to the bridge."

Whether or not it includes a view of the stream below the surface, the site when finished will be welcoming to all members of the community, according to Geffen.

"The vision's in place," she said. "We now just have to figure out how to make it all work visually and physically."

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