



Boosting the arts in Edmonds – and the economy

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A plan almost 20 years in the making to turn part of Fourth Avenue North into a pedestrian-friendly street – including shops and restaurants with a focus on the creative arts – has entered the conceptual design phase and could be complete in five years.

The intent of the Fourth Avenue Cultural Corridor is multifaceted – to help promote the downtown economy and portray the historical and artistic face of Edmonds. It would also provide a staging area for cultural festivals to celebrate Edmonds' diversity.

The project has long been planned for Edmonds, which in 2018 was named Washington's first certified Creative District by Gov. Jay Inslee.

(A creative district is one that has a “designated, geographical, mixed-use area of a community in which a high concentration of cultural facilities, creative businesses, or arts-related businesses serve as a collective anchor of public attraction.”)

But last year, the corridor project was dropped from the 2022 budget after undergoing extensive vetting and investment, including public open houses. Current Councilmembers Susan Paine and Laura Johnson previously voted against the grant, saying more attention needed to be paid to other parts of the city, including Highway 99.

In March, however, with council turnover and a return look at the budget, a super-majority vote of 5-2 approved receiving a \$34,000 matching capital grant from the Washington State Arts Commission for the conceptual design of the project, paving the way for its resumption.

The conceptual design completed for most of the corridor in 2021 did not include the northern section, where the interface of the west edge of the ECA property and the City right of way is integral to the creation of a public space.

According to the City, the final phase of conceptual design brings the ECA to the table as an engaged partner in development of the design and as an additional funder to complete the conceptual plan.

The current conditions of the aging road and damaged narrow sidewalks, with no amenities or adequate lighting except for a temporary roadway light art installation, do little to encourage pedestrian connectivity between the Edmonds Center for the Arts activity center and Main Street businesses, the City says.

The special mixed-use zoning designation along the corridor hopes to encourage reuse and redevelopment. And the redeveloped street is envisioned as a place allowing for special events, temporary exhibits, small festivals, and other community activities.

At Edmonds Street, the creation of an art pocket park on the northeast side of the intersection will provide a resting spot for pedestrians and a contemplative seating area with a view toward Puget Sound.

This small park provides a direct connection point to the new Civic Park, the new community park currently under construction two blocks to the east and visually connected to the ECA.

Grant was necessary

Councilmember Diane Buckshnis has said that not matching the state's grant could lead to the end of the city's Creative District designation.

Paine and Laura Johnson again cast dissenting votes.

The Edmonds Center for the Arts contributed \$20,000 to the project, bringing the design phase total to \$88,000.

The corridor is planned to start at Main Street and end on Third Avenue North just west of the ECA. The street is currently a roadway with sidewalks, but the plan is to turn it into a walkable corridor.

The idea for the Fourth Avenue Cultural Corridor was born between 2003 and 2004 when the Parks Department, Edmonds Arts Commission, and Planning Board brainstormed ways to link the then-proposed ECA to the retail shops and restaurants in downtown Edmonds.

In 2006, the Parks, Recreation and Cultural Service Department added the Fourth Avenue Arts Corridor concept plan when updating the Streetscape Plan.

In 2007 Edmonds received a matching grant for \$50,000 from the National Park Service's Preserve America Program to develop the Fourth Avenue Cultural Corridor Implementation and Funding Plan, adopted in 2009.

However, there still wasn't enough money to complete the Fourth Avenue Cultural Corridor as the cost to redevelop the three-block street section hovered around \$8 million. At present, the project is in the conceptual design process, which is 15% of the design phase, said Paine. After the conceptual design, more details of the actual design will be added to reach 30% of the design process.

After passing the 30% threshold, the city will have a more comprehensive budget for the project and will be prepared to seek the funding needed to complete the rest.

“Luminous Forest”

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Arts and cultural impact

Edmonds' art and culture sector brings in about \$50 million for the city's economy and creates approximately 440 jobs, according to Patrick Doherty, the City's former development and community services director. There is no concrete data on how Edmonds' Creative District would profit as of now, he added, because the city is the first to gain state certification.

Buckshnis, who voted for the motion to add a \$34,000 match to complete the conceptual design phase of the Cultural Corridor, said the district could capitalize on Edmonds' unique characteristics.

"I believe that we need to continue to promote our downtown area because we're a coastal community, which is very rare for a lot of cities," she said. "I just think it'll enhance the connectivity of the walking corridor, and it will just continue to contribute to the economic vitality of downtown."

Matching the state grant was crucial to demonstrate that the city has not lost interest in the project, although the pace of the project has been somewhat delayed by several factors, said Buckshnis.

Part of that has been the City's focus on redeveloping Highway 99. The project was also slowed because it has been less of a priority than some other items on the to-do list for the City, such as aging infrastructures, essential services, and other services within the Parks and Recreation department.

"It's something that will enhance the city, but it's not essential," Buckshnis said. "I mean, it is essential now to keep our Creative District designation, but it's not paving streets or putting a water main in."

In addition, the Great Recession was a factor that pushed the brakes on Fourth Avenue.

The project receives a large part of its funding from the Creative District designation, which is limited to 40 square blocks downtown.

The targeted area was part of what drew resistance from some City officials, including Paine.

“Some of our neighborhoods don’t even have sidewalks to get to parks and other amenities,” she said. “So it’s difficult to want to support it wholeheartedly because there’s already a lot of built-in nice things down in the central business district.”

She has previously commented that she thinks the city should support the arts around all parts of Edmonds. She said she’s frustrated that the Creative District is restricted to only a certain part of the city.

Finding the rest of the estimated \$8 million cost for the project remains a heavy task for the City, even as the Creative District grant helps with the cost. Of course, the project is very much in its infancy, the cost isn’t definite, and there are typically cost overruns and other unknown factors that could intervene.

Paine is also concerned about how homes along the planned corridor could be affected.

“The plan includes having really wide sidewalks, and currently some people believe that their yards are a part of that sidewalk,” she said. “They’re going to lose some of their frontages by a foot or two or three or four, depending on where the sidewalk really does end.”

And when – or if – new buildings and businesses arrive on Fourth Avenue, Paine said she’s worried that may “gentrify and kick some of the older residents out that can’t compete with what new buildings will bring in.”