

Column for Voice for October 2018

Find out how playing the spoons can make Rockford more beautiful

By John Groh

Walking to lunch in downtown Rockford has never been as satisfying as it was this summer. Even rainy days were enlivened by bursts of colorful flowers in huge planters and hanging baskets. Previously unremarkable spaces around parking lots and downtown buildings have been landscaped and planted with attractive perennials and annual flowers.

The installation of 13 sculptures by Midwest artists in and near downtown added pizzazz with interesting architectural shapes, touches of whimsy and spots of color. Grab your pedometer or open your favorite fitness app and walk the sculpture route. It's a fun way to get in your steps this fall. (You'll find a printable map of all the sculptures at gorockford.com/publicart.)

Soon, large new murals by internationally known artists will join the mix of interesting art elements in or near downtown. Muralists whose work has caused a sensation in other cities are coming here to create public art that is sure to please area residents and attract visitors. More about the sculpture project in a moment.

Vintage Circus to benefit beautification

These efforts, which add so much aesthetic appeal to our city, trace to Forest City Beautiful, a program of the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau that began in 2014. With donations from individuals and businesses, and with lots of help from volunteers, the program has made a huge difference in a short period of time. Beyond planting flowers, we've installed attractive benches and tables in areas where they are used by people who live and work downtown, as well as by visitors.

Forest City Beautiful is planning to expand its efforts beyond downtown, including projects to make the city's gateways more attractive.

It doesn't just happen, you know. The engine behind Forest City Beautiful projects are people who give generously of their time and money. **A large portion of the funds needed to launch new initiatives and maintain existing ones is raised at the annual "Paint the Town Green" fundraiser, which is set for 6-10 p.m., Friday, Oct. 12, at Klehm Arboretum & Botanic Garden.**

This year, we're presenting a Vintage Circus featuring show-stopping aerial acts under the Big Top performed by Chicago-based Aloft Circus. The Spin-Spun Cotton Candy Experience will serve up sugar in a whole new way. We'll have street performers and side shows, too. Count on Alchemy to conjure up delicacies of food and drink in a magical environment created by Event Floral. The cost is \$75 per person. (Go to Eventbrite.com to purchase tickets.)

When murals go viral

Proceeds from the event will help launch the next big beautification initiative – a new "Paint the Town" mural project. One mural will be painted by Kelsey Montague, a young street artist who may be best known for the angel wings she's painted on walls in cities around the world. A wing mural Montague

created went viral when Taylor Swift posed in front of it and posted on Instagram. Now, people wait in long lines to pose and post at Montague's murals in Nashville, New York and elsewhere.

Montague is planning a similarly interactive piece for Rockford, something featuring trees, treehouse and a footbridge. That mural will be at 331 E. State St.

Popular Chicago-based street artist Justus Roe will create a mural on a retaining wall in the 500 block of 6th Street, a one-way flowing into downtown. Roe's work, typically abstract, colorful and detailed, evokes aerial perspectives and geometric shapes.

You can help make it – and efforts like these – happen by joining us at the Vintage Circus on Oct. 12. I guarantee you've never seen an act like Abby the Spoon Lady from North Carolina. You won't want to miss it.

John Groh is president/CEO of Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau. The mission of the RACVB is to drive quality of life and economic growth for our citizens through tourism marketing and destination development. www.gorockford.com

The views expressed are Groh's and do not necessarily represent those of the Rockford Chamber of Commerce.