

Lenox Cultural District

Lenox Cultural District looks past snow, pandemic to arts, music events

By Clarence Fanto, Eagle correspondent

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"Gates of Transcendence," by Michael Alfano, graced Lilac Park in Lenox in 2020, during the Lenox Art Walk. The event is among several launched last year under coronavirus pandemic restrictions that are set to expand this year.

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LENOX — Despite mounds of snow decorating the downtown historic village, and with an uncertain outlook for the summer arts and entertainment season because of COVID-19, the Lenox Cultural District is planning a series of outdoor activities for spring and beyond.

The district's mission is to promote cultural resources not only within its defined boundaries in the village center, but also for the small businesses and large venues "that help make Lenox unique and vibrant throughout the year," Land Use Director and Town Planner Gwen Miller said at the organization's recent virtual meeting.

As a hub, the district, established in 2019 by the Mass Cultural Council, works as a spoke leading to smaller and outlying attractions, she added, with pathways and signs, as well as creation of new offseason and summertime programming and events.

An additional goal is to collaborate with the county's other defined cultural districts in Pittsfield, Great Barrington, North Adams and Williamstown.

Efforts to heighten the Lenox Cultural District's profile and create countywide events are underway, said Laura Brennan of the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission. All five Berkshire districts are organizing a countywide Art Week for Sept. 18-26, she said, combining in-person and virtual activities.

Events launched last year under coronavirus pandemic restrictions and set to expand this year include the new Lenox Loves Music series, weekly small-scale, pop-up performances on Sunday afternoons, as well as the Lenox Art Walk and Lenox Winterland's Tree Walk, which is set to expand next December to 50 small trees located at lampposts downtown.

The 2020 music series featured cabaret singer Sherri Buxton, the rock-focused Johnny Irion Band, folk rockers Oakes & Smith, the jazz-klezmer Paul Green Jazz Trio and the Convo Combo jazz trio, among others.



Lenox Loves Music plans up to 14 events during the “shoulder seasons” from mid-May through June, returning in September through mid-October.

With Tanglewood and other cultural destinations closed last summer by COVID-19, “we wanted a way to revitalize downtown and keep it very lively and festive,” said cultural district member Natalie Neubert, executive director of the Pittsfield-based Berkshire Music School.

The informal, ambient performances showcasing local musicians who had been sidelined by the pandemic helped attract customers to hard-pressed local restaurants and retailers, she noted.

With the annual Apple Squeeze street festival canceled, the town’s chamber of commerce and the cultural district organized the Lenox Art Walk for the final weekend of September, said Jennifer Nacht, the business group’s executive director. Much to her pleasant surprise, about 1,500 visitors attended the spaced-out, socially distant event.

Collaborating with Richard and Joanna Rothbard of An American Craftsman Gallery and American Art Marketing, Nacht organized an extensive promotional campaign, including digital marketing, prominent billboards, lawn signs, posters and banners in multiple locations around the county.



“We had great feedback,” she said. The next Art Walk is planned for late spring, with a reprise in mid-September in case it’s possible to bring back the Apple Squeeze for the end of the month, Nacht added.



Main Street buzzes with foot traffic during the Lenox Apple Squeeze in 2018. The event was canceled in 2020 because of the coronavirus pandemic, and organizers are hopeful that it might return this year.

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“The goal of the chamber is to bring in younger families and millennials,” she said, which coincides with the town’s master plan and cultural district goals. “It’s to be very inclusive.”

Instagram and Facebook messaging have been crucial for spreading the word about new and ongoing events, according to Beth Gamble, communications advocate for the cultural district. “We have to continue educating everyone about the district and its benefits to district partners, residents and visitors,” she said.

Select Board member Marybeth Mitts, also a cultural district member working on setting up historical scavenger hunts for spring and summer, saluted Nacht and Deirdre McKenna, creative services manager of the chamber, for “efforts that have been nothing else than heroic for the town of Lenox for the past year.”

“We could not have asked for better partners getting the word out,” she said. “We owe a lot to you guys. The funding the town put into the chamber gave us a big return on investment.”

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https://berkshireeagle.com/news/local/lenox-cultural-district-looks-past-snow-pandemic-to-arts-music-events/article_a54f7354-665e-11eb-90bf-8feb0d265cc7.html

