

Citywide art project will be timed to Heritage Festival

By David Delcore, *The Times Argus*

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Stefan Hard / Staff Photo Gallery associate James Secor juggles skeins of yarn Tuesday at Studio Place Arts in Barre, where they are collecting fiber of all kinds for a community-wide outdoor art installation.

Imagine how many heads would turn if Barre awoke one morning and Youth Triumphant, the statue of the kneeling naked soldier in City Hall Park, was suddenly sporting a sweater vest?

As improbable as that might sound, it is within the realm of possibility, according to the woman who is busily recruiting an army of folks interested in contributing to the "outdoor art explosion" that has been dubbed "Soft Bomb Barre."

Sue Higby, executive director of Studio Place Arts, said the idea is a riff on "yarn-bombing," which has become increasingly popular in some areas, but is a touch too focused for her taste.

"Why should knitters have all the fun?" said Higby, who prefers sewing and believes there's more than one way to display Barre's softer side this summer.

"It's going to be an open-ended fiber kind of concept," Higby said of what she described as a still-growing list of outdoor installations that will start cropping up in mid-July and hopefully remain through the end of August.

Despite its explosive name, this one is all about fiber optics, because the plan is to use fabrics and fibers in eye-catching ways, creating unusual accents in unexpected places throughout downtown, just in time for the Barre Heritage Festival.

Like a sweater vest for Youth Triumphant?

"That could be possible," said Higby, who concedes crocheting a cap for the centerpiece of the local soldiers' and sailors memorial would surely be easier.

"He (Youth Triumphant) is a substantially built guy, so it (a sweater vest) would require quite an adventurous knitter," she said.

Higby said Barre's ample supply of public sculpture — from full-blown statues such as Youth Triumphant to its growing number of granite bike racks — are all begging to be "soft bombed."

Could someone consider crafting a silk cape for the towering Italian stonecutter in Dente Park, perhaps using a color scheme that mimics Italy's tri-colored flag?

Why not?

They'd need some help installing it, of course, but the concept of creating a "super sculptor" at one of the Granite City's busiest intersections is as plausible as making a kilt for the statue of Scottish poet Bobby Burns, which is on the Washington Street lawn of the Vermont History Center.

Higby is currently fielding ideas from folks, and teams of folks, interested with ideas about installations both large and small, talking to property owners and gathering soft bomb building materials for those who might need them.

"It's our version of 'uranium,'" she said of the bags of yarn and recycled textiles currently stored in SPA's first-floor classroom.

Plans to harvest unwanted neckties from executives at National Life are already in the works and Higby said she'll likely make a similar request at Central Vermont Medical Center in order to expand her arsenal.

In the right hands, Higby said, the silk ties could be artfully woven around "up-cycled" lamp shades that will be strategically deployed throughout the downtown.

"This is a community art activity," she said. "Anything is possible."

Higby said the kind "fairies" who recently decorated downtown parking meters with knit hats and mittens and lamp posts with scarves — all for the taking — unwittingly embraced the spirit of the "soft bomb" that was initially pitched by SPA artist Pria Cambio.

In Cambio's view, fabric and fiber connote comfort and central Vermont could use a dose of that.

"A lot of people need to feel comfort and this (project) is something that is not only beautiful, but it evokes a sense of good," Higby said, crediting Cambio for first expressing the sentiment.

Higby's hope is to coordinate and, if need be, facilitate the ephemeral installations that could involve decorating everything from trees, trash cans and a gazebo to park benches, parking meters and public sculptures. Those with ideas, useful materials, or both are encouraged to call Higby (479-7069) or send email to info@studioplacearts.com.

Blessed with its own knitting group, Aldrich Public Library has

plans to participate, and Higby has made some preliminary arrangements with Vermont History Center.

SPA artist Maggie Neale is making a tie-dyed silk banner for the center which, like plans to sew tie-dyed fabric to some of the trees on the property, is a nod to Vermont Historical Society's ongoing work on the 1970s counterculture in Vermont. Meanwhile, she has enlisted the assistance of a self-described "swift and adventurous knitter" from Montpelier to soft bomb the bell tower of the historic Barre building.

Thanks to a group of students from River Rock School, the SPA building will feature a colorful fabric rainbow spilling out of its second-floor window, where it will be staked in the "zipper garden" below.

A bagel-inspired installation is planned at Maria's Bagels, and Higby said there are plans for a chain-link fence installation among others.

Keeping track of the installations, especially those that might

spontaneously surface late in the game, will be a challenge, and Higby concedes there is the potential for the project to "spin out of control." That is neither a complaint nor a criticism, and it might be closer to an expectation and a hope.

"There will probably be some things that happen that I don't know about and that is part of the artistic spirit of any project," Higby said. "A little anarchy is good for a project like this."

Higby said most if not all of the installations will be in place before the start of the heritage festival, a happy coincidence that could be a source of inspiration for some, while adding a pop of color to the well-attended midsummer celebration.

The outdoor installations are actually scheduled to coincide with an indoor exhibit that SPA will be hosting in conjunction with the national Surface Design Association from July 26 through Aug. 27. That exhibit will feature the work of fiber artists working with everything from threads to textiles.