

West County Courthouse Art Reflects Community Flavor

One of the most important criteria for works commissioned through the **Palm Beach County Art in Public Places Program** is that they must be “of the place,” says **Elayna Toby Singer**, the County’s Art in Public Places Administrator. The artwork proposed for the **West County Courthouse** in Belle Glade offers a case in point.

During a “Community Public Art Input Session” in May, local citizens – including long-time resident and well-known philanthropist **Dolly Hand** – offered many insightful comments about the flavor and content of the design proposed by artist **Shanon Materio** and her colleagues on the design team. As a result, the artists agreed to revise several details in order to reflect the region as accurately as possible.

For example, Materio says, “They asked us to ensure that the vegetables included in the design were ones that are grown in West County.” The feedback provided an extremely useful supplement to the research Materio conducted – and confirmed the validity of the Art in Public Places program’s inclusive approach. “The process makes it clear that they want to engage the community,” she notes.

The design for the project – which was created by Materio, owner of **McMow Art Glass** in Lake Worth since 1976, and three other dynamic and enthusiastic women – comprises a series of glass mosaic benches and decorative columns for the entrance plaza at the concrete-block Courthouse building. Materio has created art glass commissions around the world and has worked for clients such as the late **Gianni Versace**, **Palm Beach Atlantic University**, **St. Peter Catholic Church**, **PGA National Resort and Spa**, **Temple Emanuel** and **Temple Judea**.

Working with her are **Marilyn Ford**, senior artist with McMow Art Glass for 23 years; **Tricia Davis**, the newest member of the McMow team, who holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from **Virginia Commonwealth University**; and **Roberta Journey**, who has been involved with many organizations’ projects in Palm Beach County, including the **Junior League of the Palm Beaches**, **the South Florida Fair**, **Quantum House** and **ArtiGras Fine Arts Festival**.

According to Singer, the process leading to the West County Courthouse public art installation began in January with an open call to Palm Beach County artists. Following an on-site walkthrough in February, seven proposals were submitted, from which three semifinalists were chosen by the Selection Panel, composed of the County’s Public Art Committee, the Chief Judge and County staff who work in the West County Courthouse facility. Each of the semifinalists received a \$500 honorarium for developing their proposals. Materio’s team was selected in May.

Now that the public input session has been completed, the project will be reviewed by the County’s Judicial Executive Committee. If approval is granted, work is expected to begin in July.

At that point, community participants will once again become involved. Materio explains that children in local youth programs will create glass mosaic stepping stones. “We are developing about 15 to 20 Indian motifs that are colorful and geometric. The children will glue tiny squares of polished glass to mesh in the shape of an 18- to 20-inch half moon. Then we’ll take them back to the studio and grout them.”



Shanon Materio displays a glass panel similar to the ones that will be incorporated into the West County Courthouse project.

The plaza design will accommodate as many as 75 of the shapes, she says. The final number will depend on how many children participate. “They’ll be working in pairs or teams. It’s a good way for them to learn teamwork,” Materio points out. “The whole concept is a lot of fun.”

“Public art is as much about engaging people in the process of making art as it is about the completed art itself,” Singer observes. “We are pleased that individuals from the community are taking advantage of this opportunity to creatively work together and artistically influence their environment.”

The \$40,000 project is funded by the 1999 Cultural and Recreation Facilities Bond issue, which allocated \$500,000 for public art at the County’s Courthouses. This is the first project that Singer will have seen through from its inception since she joined the County in 2004.

She adds that one more enhancement that was proposed by community residents will be incorporated when the project is completed in early Spring 2006. “When we asked what could make the proposed design better, it was suggested that we should light the Courthouse at night to illuminate the public art. We will be able to do that.”

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– *Elayna Toby Singer*