

Town buzzing over mural plans

By Grant Masini
Staff Writer

Six years ago, Manhattan artist Matthew Willey was working in his studio when a bee flew into the room.

Willey soon began painting bees and researching the problems they face. Now, his passion for bee conservation has reached Carrboro.

A muralist for more than 20 years, Willey completed the first mural for “The Good of the Hive” series in LaBelle, Florida.

“After the first one someone said, ‘Why don’t you paint a whole lot of bees?’” said Willey. “Fifty thousand is the number for a thriving hive, so I thought, ‘Why not put that number out there?’”

Carrboro leaders say being part of the project, in which Willey hopes to paint 50,000 bees on about 40 murals, is a welcome addition to their efforts to promote the town’s status as a Bee City USA community.

“We’re thrilled,” said alderman Bethany Chaney. “We think it’s a great progression and synergy with some of the things we’ve been doing for bees in Carrboro.”

Willey said his passion for bees centers around their existence as both individuals and as a collective organism. He said sick bees are known to commit altruistic suicide, abandoning their hive for the good of the group.

“It’s one collective piece of artwork because the bees are such a symbol of connection,” he said. “They seamlessly exist as one and as individuals. That’s the big reason for me as an artist.”

Willey worked with local government to find the future site of the mural, ultimately choosing the north wall of Fire Station 1 on West Main Street.

“It had a good vibe,” Willey said. “I want to be in a small town. The world moves so fast right now — this is about standing there and painting bee after bee until enough people realize how big the problem is.”

Alderman Randee Haven-O’Donnell said before pursuing a project like this, the board must ask what the art is for and whether it complements things the town is already involved in.

“In this case it certainly is and does,” she said. “That’s one of the key components of the project.”

Chaney said she doesn’t know whether the mural will add economic value to the town, but that it doesn’t matter to her.

“It adds beauty to a plain wall,” she said. “But in this case it also has educational value, and we’re excited the town can participate and help create a connection between the art and our pollination efforts.”

Chaney lauded Willey for bringing ideas for that connection to the table with the proposal, including plans to have students at Carrboro Elementary teach firefighters about bees.

“Depending on what the final mural is, we could do so many interesting things,” she said. “Poetry contests, events about community health based on the hive being one organism, anything. I’d love to toy with that and see how we can honor and bring out the full meaning of the mural.”

Carrboro leaders approved the mural



Matthew Willey began “The Good of the Hive” project in LaBelle, Florida. He hopes to paint 50,000 bees across the country in about 40 more murals. (Photo courtesy of Matthew Willey)

as discussions open up about how to deal with graffiti in the area, which police reports reveal has increased in recent years.

Chaney said she does not object on principle to street art as a means of expression, but perspective matters.

“One person’s self-expression or protest can be someone else’s mess they have to clean up,” she said. “If you want public art that’s sustainable and adds value to the community, you have to find ways to encourage that.”

Willey said he believes art in all capacity changes the world, even someone tagging a building with spray paint — and yes, even if it were on one of his murals.

“I love discovering some little mark somebody made on the Earth because that’s the only way they could think of to shout ‘I’m here.’ Attachment is one of the biggest problems in the world. We don’t let go enough, we don’t say ‘Maybe there’s more to this than I can see.’”



Willey’s mural will be painted on Fire Station 1 on West Main Street. Planners hope the projects will help educate town residents on pollination and the bee crisis. (Staff photo by Grant Masini)