

## MidCoast Gallery West Seeks New Model to Keep Its Doors Open

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Following the departure of the Left Bank Art League from Gallery West in the District of Rock Island, MidCoast Fine Arts plans to launch a new artist-staffed sales gallery at the site next month.

MidCoast Fine Arts has hosted exhibits at its Gallery West location at 1629 Second Avenue for nearly seven years, with assistance from an operational partner staffing the space and taking on utility costs - originally the ArtFX gallery, and most recently the Left Bank Art League. But Left Bank vacated the space at the end of December, ending a partnership that began in 2005.

Now MidCoast is looking for a new model for the portion of the space that Left Bank had used as a sales gallery. The primary question, said MidCoast Executive Director Dean Schroeder, is: "Who keeps the doors open?"

"We can't do it the way it's been done," said Carolyn Krueger, a MidCoast staffer who coordinates the space for MidCoast.

A brainstorming meeting on Wednesday, January 7, attracted roughly 15 artists and arts supporters. MidCoast hosted the meeting to gauge interest in using the front part of the space for a sales gallery run by artists.

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Schroeder said MidCoast doesn't have the resources to coordinate a sales gallery itself. "I want a team put together by those people" who attended the meeting, he said. At the meeting, he said, "This conglomerate has to run the business. ... It will take real ownership."

On Thursday, Schroeder said he is confident there is enough interest to keep the space open. "There seemed to be enough positive energy," he said.

Krueger said on Tuesday that MidCoast now plans to rent out the front of the gallery to individual artists. Rent rates and the number of available slots have not been determined, she said. Artists can get a discount on rent by staffing the gallery. Krueger said the goal is to generate enough income to cover utility costs and part-time wages for a cashier when an artist is not on the premises.

The Gallery West operational partner has paid utility costs for the space, which Schroeder said ran roughly \$200 a month for electricity, heat, and air conditioning. Phone and Internet cost approximately \$130 a month. (A Left Bank representative confirmed both of those estimates.) Schroeder called that "extremely reasonable" for the space, which he said was between 600 and 700 square feet.

The money, though, is less important than staffing the space. The MidCoast portion of the gallery features two-month exhibits, but the retail component up front keeps the gallery open. "It has more to do with hours of operation," Schroeder said.

He said the target is to keep the gallery open between 24 and 28 hours a week - similar to downtown Davenport's Bucktown Center for the Arts, which is open from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday. Krueger said the tentative plan is to use those same hours for Gallery West.

MidCoast pays and will continue to pay what Schroeder called "token rent" to the Development Association of Rock Island, which owns the space and - with the City of Rock Island - spent \$120,000 renovating it.

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Diane Wall, a spokesperson for the Left Bank Art League, said two factors led to the decision to leave Gallery West: the organization refocusing on education, and the fact that the gallery didn't pay for itself. "If we had more traffic, and if it were paying for itself ... I think we would have kept it open," she said.

Wall estimated that Gallery West had between 10 and 20 visitors each week. The Left Bank Art League collected a commission of 20 or 30 percent on works sold from its space, and 35 percent on works from the MidCoast portion of the gallery.

Krueger said that amount of foot traffic is not sufficient to sustain a commission gallery, and she admitted that it wouldn't be enough to attract and retain artists renting space. "We've got to get more bodies in the door," she said. To that end, she said, the gallery will host more events, including music and auctions. "Everything is still in the works."

She added that by going the rental route rather than commission, artists will have a greater incentive to work to bring people to the gallery - through the choice of work for sale, classes, and events. They have a larger investment, she said: "It would give these artists a sense of ownership."

The consensus among artists at the meeting last week was that they preferred paying rent to giving a commission, although there was concern expressed about the logistical headache of paying Illinois sales tax.