

**To the Mayor and Members of the City Council****August 10, 2021**

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**SUBJECT: UPDATE ON PROGRAM TO INTERPRET THE MURALS ON THE WRMC AUDITORIUM AND COLISEUM AND RECOMMEND FUNDING FOR PROJECT COMPLETION**

The purpose of this Informal Report is to provide an update on the continuing process associated with developing contextual interpretation of the Will Rogers Memorial Center Murals and to make a recommendation for funding of the project.

Noted Fort Worth architect Wyatt C. Hedrick designed the Auditorium, Coliseum and Tower for the Texas Centennial celebration in 1936. The Auditorium and Coliseum were adorned with two, 200-foot-long hand painted tile friezes characteristic of other WPA murals in the 1930s. The murals were designed by architect Herman Koeppel and Kenneth Gale, artistic director at the Zanesville, Ohio, Mosaic Tile Company. The Auditorium frieze traces the settlement and industrial development of the West, while Coliseum scenes depict the romance of the range and the various settlers who shaped the cultural heritage of the Southwest. The historical subjects depicted in the two large tile murals were selected by W.J. Hammond, who was a Fort Worth city councilman (later, Mayor) and head of the Department of History at Texas Christian University.

On August 9, 2019, a news story reported, "Some activists are pushing the city of Fort Worth to remove part of the mural on the Will Rogers Memorial Center that depicts two African-American men picking cotton." As the story gained traction on social media, some citizens started pushing the city to remove the image. In September 2019, the Mayor's Office met with city and Arts Council staff and determined that the city's advisory body, the Fort Worth Art Commission, should gather community input and make recommendations in response to the citizen's concern about the portrayal of African Americans on the tile mural on the Auditorium.

At a Special Called meeting of the Art Commission on October 7, 2019, the City's Historic Preservation Officer, Murray Miller provided historic context of the mural in relationship to its creation and the architecture. Following the presentation it was the consensus of the Commission to hold a public hearing to gather citizen input on how to move forward.

Following the public hearing (November 11, 2019), it was determined that instead of removing the mural, a method to provide historical context should be explored. At a Special Called Arts Commission meeting, November 21, 2019, held at the Hazel Harvey Peace Center for Neighborhoods, community members supported keeping the mural intact and providing some form of interpretation of the murals. The following January 2020, the Art Commission approved recommendations, stating, "The Fort Worth Art Commission has determined that while the citizens' concerns were based upon possible misinterpretation of the imagery along with the negative response to the stylistic approach of the 1930s, it is vital that the City provide educational interpretation for the benefit of citizens and visitors who view the mural now and into the future." One of the recommendations was to convene an Advisory Committee to develop an approach that would allow visitors to better understand the historic perspective. The committee met for the first time on February 27, 2020.

**Advisory Committee Members:**

Estrus Tucker, Chair, Art Commission  
Leslie Thompson, Art Commission  
Maggie Adler, Art Commission  
Estella Williams, President, NAACP FW/Tarrant County  
Blake Moorman, NAACP FW/Tarrant County  
Frederick Cowlah, Artist / TROOF Graphics, LLC  
Jennifer Casler Price, Kimbell Art Museum  
Kevin Kemp, Assistant Public Events Director – Will Rogers Memorial Center  
Chris Harmon, Acting Sr. Capital Projects Officer – Public Events Department  
Justin Newhart, Historic Preservation Officer, CFW  
Michelle Gutt, Director, Communications & Public Engagement, CFW  
Martha Peters, Director, Fort Worth Public Art  
Jenny Conn, Public Art Collection Manager, FWPA  
Michael Asbill, Community Engagement, FWPA

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The Art Commission recommended a project budget of \$35,000 for design work for interpretation of the Auditorium mural, temporary signage, and print materials in the FY2021 Public Art Annual Work Plan with Reprogramming approved by City Council on September 22, 2020 (MC 20-0678). Elements of Architecture was contracted in December 2020 to provide final design and layouts, recommendations for materials, and a preliminary budget for the interpretation plan. Arts Council staff has provided research and draft interpretive text.

On July 19, 2021, the Advisory Committee's recommendation for comprehensive interpretation at the WRMC Auditorium mural was presented to the Fort Worth Art Commission. The recommendation includes seven bronze plaques installed in the brick pattern on the plaza in front of the Auditorium and the Coliseum: one introductory plaque and six plaques corresponding to the six scenes viewable in each mural. Each of the six plaques features a silhouette of a specific scene on the mural with text descriptive of the time period represented and themes explored in the imagery.

Fort Worth Public Art will re-engage with Elements of Architecture, LLC to complete layouts for the Coliseum Mural while Arts Council staff drafts interpretive text. Following the Advisory Committee's review of final interpretation, they will make their recommendation to the Art Commission and the Commission will then conduct a community input gathering process. Once the final design and text have been approved, the Art Commission's recommendation for plaque design and interpretation will be presented to City Council for implementation.

At the beginning of this project, FWPA allocated \$35,000 for design, temporary signage and print material and the Public Events Department earmarked \$100,000 for fabrication and installation of permanent signage. A preliminary budget for the fabrication and installation, as presented here is estimated to be \$400,000. It is the recommendation of the Public Events Department that the balance needed in the amount of \$300,000 be provided through the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) Subtitle M (Local Fiscal Recovery Funds), Section 9901, Subsection 603(c)(1)(A).

**Funding:**

Culture & Tourism Reserves	\$100,000.00
ARPA	<u>\$300,000.00</u>
Total	\$400,000.00

If you have any questions or concerns related to this effort, please contact Michael Crum, Director of the Public Events Department, at 817-392-2501.

**David Cooke**  
**City Manager**