CONNECTICUT

Bushnell Park sets stage for new dance series

With 4 performances over the next year, 'In the Presence of Trees' follows the change of seasons

By Christopher Arnott
Hartford Courant

The trees of Hartford are setting the stage for a new yearlong environmentally themed outdoor dance series by the Justice Dance Performance Project.

"In the Presence of Trees" will kick off with an introductory event on July 19 in Bushnell Park, then will follow the change of seasons with an autumnal performance in Bloomfield, a winter dance in Hartford's Keney Park that will be filmed (so that just the dancers and not the audience will have to brave the cold) and a concluding event in the spring of 2023 back in Bushnell Park.

"This is the community launch of a project that will happen throughout the year," said JDPP's founder and Artistic Director Judy Dworin. "We wanted to do it at a time when people were out and about."

She describes the work, which she created in collaboration with the dancers in the company, as "family-friendly. It's about awareness of the trees, performed at various parks in the Hartford area. This event at The Bushnell is kind of a preview."

It's a very full, nearly five-hour preview. The 6 p.m. performance is preceded by:

- A 3:30 p.m. ecology-themed panel exhibit: "Frederic Law Olmsted: Landscapes for the Public Good" exploring the local work of the famous park planner.
- A 4:30 p.m. tour of notable trees in Bushnell Park led by Matt "Twig" Largess of Largess Forestry, a Rhode Island company dedicated to the preservation, restoration and general awareness of forests.
- Rides on the Bushnell Park carousel, which will be opened for this special occasion from 4:30 to 5:30 pm. Promotion materials for the day note that the carousel is situated "in the shade of the great Turkey Oak."
- A guided tour of the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Arch at the edge of the park.

The 6:30 p.m. JDPP performance is described as a work-in-progress presentation and features seven dancers. The performance is followed by a talkback with Dworin, the dancers and the show's visual designer.

The Frederick Law Olmsted display and the Matt Largess tree tour were arranged by Trinity College, which has been hosting an "Olmsted 200" series of events in honor of the 200th anniversary of the landscape architect's birth. Dworin says she has been working closely with Trinity professor of applied science Susan Masino on the projects.

Each of the four "In the Presence of Trees" performances, Dworin says, are about "the same thing — they're about trees. They're dances that happen with trees." The musical score for the dances will change, she says, based on the content and time of year. One dance may feature a live poetry reading. The winter one is a film.

"We are making the piece each time in a new environment."

Justice Dance Performance Project, which changed its name last year from Judy Dworin Performance Project, has been creating social justice-oriented dance pieces for more than three decades. The company's work has explored issues such as slavery, immigration and violence against women. The troupe regularly works and performs with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, JDPP started envisioning more outdoor performances.

"It was the safest place to perform at the time," Dworin said, "and still is in a way." The choreographer feels that gathering outside is "healing for both the performers and the audiences."

"This is our first piece about environmental justice," Dworin said, but the themes of "In the Presence of Trees" are in line with other JDPP projects. "We have always told stories that have not been told before." In this case, some of the stories come not from people but from trees.

"There are networks of communication," Dworin said, "that happen in forests. A fungus is the connection. Trees are communicating all the time. I did a lot of reading on it before we began working on the piece."

She recommends Suzanne Simard's book "Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest."

"We can learn so much from trees," Dworin said. "This is a strong theme and a continuing one. Important values are disappearing in our time. We need to step outside, be in the forest and listen, be in the presence of trees."

To that end, do any of the dancers have strong pollen allergies? Dworin laughs. "The main thing we're worried about is ticks and poison ivy."

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Cannabis

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10% or an unemployment rate higher than 10%, as determined by the Social Equity Council.

Two applicants are residents of Bridgeport; five are in Hartford; three are in New Britain; and one each is in Manchester, Middletown, Southington and Stamford; and two are in Waterbury. They will not necessarily open cannabis businesses in those municipalities.

The action is separate from a lottery that will pick from 37,294 applications and award 56 licenses for manufacturing, packaging transporting, delivery, food and beverage and other cannabis business operations. Nearly 14,000 of the applicants are not part of the state's social equity program.

To meet the social equity criteria applicants must have lived in a disproportionately impacted area for at least five of the 10 years before applying for the license or nine years before they turn 18 and have an average household income of $235,332 over the three tax years, or about $78,000 a year before the application.

They also must have at least a 65% interest in the cannabis business. That provision — making sure businesses in line for a state license are owned and controlled by entrepreneurs who meet the social equity criteria — took up much of the discussion. Eight applicants were denied over ownership and control issues.

Subira Gordon, a member of the council, questioned if the state is avoiding ambiguities in who owns and operates the businesses.

"When there's a gray area it often does not end in the best interests for communities of color," she said.

Geoffrey Magon, of Cohn-Reznick, a consulting firm that worked with the Social Equity Council, said its review used organizational charts and operation and management agreements to determine how ownership and control were delegated.

Applications that were ambiguous were denied by reviewers looking at claims of ownership and control, he said. Questioned by council members, Magon said those who reviewed the applications relied on documentation and support provided by the applicants.

Officials intend for the businesses to open by the end of the year.

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Murphy talks lessons learned from walking across Connecticut

By Stephen Underwood
Hartford Courant

U.S. Sen. Chris Murphy wrapped up what he calls his "favorite week of the year" as the 48-year-old Democrat finished his sixth "Walk Across Connecticut" on Friday in New Haven.

Murphy, trading in his business suit for shorts and a T-shirt, makes it his mission to visit places off the beaten path while talking to constituents on the ground. Embarking in a kayak on the Housatonic River and spending time along the Appalachian Trail, Murphy walked 69 miles through 14 towns.

"In this kind of job you have to guard against being put in a bubble," Murphy said. "There's a danger — that you can come to believe what's dominating the TV news cycle or what's being talked about in Washington — actually matters to your state. This keeps me grounded."

Murphy started the annual walk in 2016 as a way to hear about issues that people find important outside of the typical political chatter.

"There is a symbolism to the walk," Murphy said. "It's part of trying to reach out to the people of Connecticut who maybe don't ever write or call my office. It's the idea that I'm willing to go to great lengths to get this job right and talk to everyone."

Each day on this year's four-day walk, Murphy walked 15 to 20 miles.

"It sounds corny, but I do fall in love with the state every time I walk across it," Murphy said. "The state is so beautiful and each time I see it is in a totally different way."

But while some residents stop to just talk about life and grab a beer, Murphy said he hears a lot of the same concerns over the years.

"Generally people talk about personal issues or things affecting their town," Murphy said. "It's normally not the issues in the headlines that people talk about. I hear about the same set of economic and safety issues year to year. This is an important reminder for me to keep working on the same issues people care about."

The Highland Park shooting in Illinois — which left seven people dead and 46 wounded at an Independence Day parade — happened on the first day of Murphy's walk.

"Gun safety became a more frequent topic of discussion than previous years," Murphy said. "We just passed an important gun bill so it was something people were asking a lot about."

President Joe Biden last month signed into law the first major gun safety legislation passed by Congress in nearly 30 years.

The legislation, a bipartisan bill spearheaded by Murphy, includes incentives for states to pass so-called red flag laws that allow groups to petition courts to remove weapons from people deemed a threat to themselves or others.



Sen. Chris Murphy walks along Palmer Road in Scotland during his second annual walk around Connecticut to talk with residents and see the state he represents. **PETER CASOLINO/SPECIAL TO THE COURANT**

"Just another reminder on the importance of the work being done to ensure gun safety," Murphy said.

Other issues Murphy said he hears frequently include the cost of living, wages, quality of schools and safety of neighborhoods.

"These kitchen table issues always dominate the conversation," Murphy said. "The economy is always on the minds of voters. Schools are another important issue that draws a lot of interest. These issues remain a focus."

Murphy said the most important lessons he learns from walking are what's happening on the municipal level in towns across the state.

"When I was walking through Bethany and Woodbridge, I was approached frequently about local issues," Murphy said. "Those towns just came through a pretty brutal school budget process that saw some conspiracy theories over inclusion and critical race theory. A lot of people just wanted to talk to me about their thoughts on it. It also allows me to learn about local issues."

As far as holding this event every year, Murphy said he plans to do it for as long as he is physically able.

"I'm getting older," Murphy said. "There will come a day when I can't do this anymore. But as for now I will continue to do this for as long as I am able."

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Specialty grocery store approved in Glastonbury

By Stephen Underwood
Hartford Courant

Glastonbury residents will soon have a new place to buy groceries. A "specialty grocery store" has been approved on Hebron Avenue on a parcel of land between Sycamore and Lyndon streets.

While officials would not confirm what company plans to take over the space, Trader Joes was mentioned in the Town Planning and Zoning meeting minutes in reference to a study on parking.

The plan for 400 Hebron Ave., which is currently vacant, was approved July 5 on a 4-2 vote by The Town Planning and Zoning Commission.

The application sought a special permit to construct a delivery area on the west side of the existing building for a grocery outlet and an expansion of the parking area for an adjacent business utilizing 366 Hebron Ave. and 7 Linden St.

Vice Chairwoman Sharon Purtill and Secretary Michael Botelho, who voted against the approval, cited town engineer Daniel Pennington as a reason for their hesitation.

"I consistently defer to town staff on many issues and I was reluctant to vote yes on this because our town engineer had raised some questions about traffic issues," Botelho said. "Generally I am supportive of the project overall but would have liked more information on how this will impact traffic, which we did not get."

The developers' traffic engineer, Mark Vertucci of Fuss & O'Neill, said the increase in traffic from the grocery store would be minimal.

As part of the proposal, Sycamore Street will be widened along with the addition of a second northbound lane at the intersection of Sycamore Street and Hebron Avenue that Vertucci said will help with "baseline traffic on the road network."

According to the meeting minutes, Vertucci reviewed a simulated traffic study of the intersection that showed a slight increase in traffic volume for both Friday peak hour at 2-3 cars and Saturday at 7-9 cars.

Pennington had expressed hesitation with the findings after he asked the developer for "real world data" on the number of trips generated by stores like the one proposed — and that the result was "almost exactly double" what would be expected — according to an Institute of Transportation Engineers manual used in projecting traffic volumes.

"The concern is that there will be times within the peak hour where the traffic will not dissipate within a signal cycle," said Pennington, according to the minutes from Tuesday's meeting.

Pennington also expressed concern for adequate parking spaces but Vertucci said that "comparable stores have fewer parking spaces" than what has been proposed.

As approved last Tuesday, the building will have 131 parking spaces, which is 25 over the town's zoning regulation requirement for the grocer and adjoining tenants.

As part of the proposal, two houses at 7 Linden St. and 366 Hebron Ave. will be removed and an additional parking lot will be built on the west side of the building for store employees.

According to TPZ members, the proposal has been generally met with enthusiasm from neighbors looking to add more alternatives to meet their shopping needs.

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Project

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project near Dunkin' Donuts Park; and Michaels Organization of New Jersey, which has an office in Boston, CRDA said.

Michael W. Freimuth, CRDA's executive director, said the plans submitted by the four developers for the 3-acre lot just east of the renovated State Office Building at 165 Capitol Ave., would cost an average of $110 million to build.

The lot is part of the larger, Bushnell South redevelopment that could eventually have as many as 1,200 residential units — both rented and owned — restaurant, shops and entertainment venues.

The 3 acres is part of a larger swath of parking lots — both state- and privately-owned — and would include a broad, pedestrian promenade with restaurants and space for outdoor events. The promenade would be between a new park adjacent to the State Office Building and a block of apartments and townhouses.

Freimuth said he could not give specific details about each proposal because the quasi-public agency is still reviewing the proposals.

Freimuth did say they are all consistent with a consultant's vision outlined last year. The focus of the review now underway is to find a partner that can be flexible as the development unfolds, particularly if market conditions change, rather than the project details, he said.

CRDA hopes to have a preferred developer selected this fall, Freimuth said.

Spinnaker Real Estate Partners LLC of Norwalk is already a partner in the Bushnell South redevelopment area with a $63 million conversion of the historic, 55 Elm St. into apartments. Spinnaker also has plans for new buildings on parking lots surrounding 55 Elm that are diagonally across from the 3-acre parking lot.

Spinnaker also is completing the $26 million apartment project at Park and Main streets.

Wonder Works Construction Corp of New York, a partner in the development of 560 rentals in the city beginning with the old Sonesta Hotel on Constitution Plaza in 2011. Wonder Works is now embarking on mixed-use conversions of downtown's Pearl Street firehouse and the former municipal office building on Main Street across from city hall.

Lennar Communities is a developer of mixed-used properties across 19 states, including Connecticut, according to its website. In Connecticut, Lennar expects to complete a mixed-use, apartment high-rise in downtown Stamford for occupancy this winter.

The Michaels Organization is a developer of mixed-use projects in 35 states, including Connecticut, and the District of Columbia. In Connecticut, Michaels has developed 6 Solomon's Crossing in New Haven and 11 Crown Street in Meriden.

Some downtown housing developers, including Martin J. Kenny, have been wary of adding another major housing project like Bushnell South before it's clear how quickly new apartments at North Crossing and along Pratt Street are leased. Kenny is part of the Pratt Street project.

Freimuth said he disagrees.

"You don't hit a button and development happens," Freimuth said. "Development is an 18, 24, 36 month process. Realistically for us to get something done and get it launched, we need to start. It's conceivable that we are 2, 3 years out from brick and mortar."

Freimuth said the rental market in and around downtown has shown, so far, that it can lease new apartments. CRDA is keeping a close watch on leasing trends and projects could be slowed or quickened depending on those trends.

"This land has been laying fallow for 50 years," Freimuth said. "Why do we have to keep on waiting?"

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