

Salisbury visioning: Arts promote quality of life

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Quality-of-life surveys aren't always kind to Salisbury, but committed citizens see it differently. 'We have a lot here; we just need to bring it to the surface,' one artist says.



Patron of the arts Adrienne Kadushin says this of herself: 'I am not an artist. I am an arts appreciator.'

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Patron of the arts Adrienne Kadushin says this of herself: 'I am not an artist. I am an arts appreciator.' / Staff photo by Todd Dudek

On a dreary Thursday afternoon, SU graphic design student Andy Smith was hanging out at Main Roots on the Downtown Plaza. He was seated in front of the coffee shop's giant picture window killing time before a meeting, scratching thoughts into a notebook. He said he could be found here most days, and is also a regular at nearby Sushi De

Kanpai and Maya Bella's Pizzeria.

Smith acknowledged he overlooked the downtown area's charm when he initially arrived in Salisbury.

"I love downtown Salisbury," he said. "I was in Salisbury for a year and a half before I knew downtown Salisbury existed."

He said the 3rd Friday arts program and the local library give the downtown area an added "family" boost, while apartments being built along the river and several new parks in the works will continue to add to its charm.

Diagnosing Salisbury's quality of life is no simple thing. The city's vibrancy and creativity are sometimes lost in comparison to more stately communities on the Upper Shore and to the tourist destinations on the Atlantic Ocean. Yet a pioneering breed of artist and outdoor athlete and professionals is working to unearth Salisbury's charms and wide range of activities.

"We are getting better, but we shouldn't stop there," retired arts teacher Clytie Taylor said.

By the numbers

On paper, the city's quality-of-life statistics leave something to be desired. As of December, the city's unemployment rate was 8 percent. The U.S. Census Bureau lists the median household income between 2008 and 2012 at \$38,534 (compared to the statewide average of \$72,999), and the persons living below poverty level for the same time frame was 27.6 percent (compared

to 9.4 percent statewide).

Still, Salisbury sits in close proximity to major American cities and an hour or less from some of the greatest beaches on the East Coast. It has a free zoo, a symphony and youth symphony, and a major university within its limits.

A quick Internet search of “quality of life” further compounds the challenges of rating Salisbury.

In some quality of life indexes, including one released in 2012 by the consulting firm Mercer, indicators surveyed included “high wages, good public infrastructure and a vibrant cultural scene.” Mercer placed Vienna, Austria, in the top spot as the world’s best city, with Zurich, Switzerland, and Auckland, New Zealand following in second and third place. The first American city to show up on the list was Honolulu, all the way down at 28.

A list of “America’s Best Small Cities,” released by CNN Money in 2010, names Ellicott City/Columbia, Md., No. 2 in the nation, second only to Eden Prairie, Minn. Money cites Ellicott City’s “grand homes, lovely 18th-century downtown and lots of restaurants.” It says Columbia “offers a wide range of housing, tons of parkland and a major music venue.” Also noted are the nearby National Security Agency and the Fort Meade Army base, which Money says together account for more than 8,000 jobs and a 2010 unemployment rate of 5.2 percent.

Salisbury shows up at No. 143 on Forbes’ August 2013 list of Best Small Places for Business and Careers. Forbes ranks the city at No. 44 in Education, No. 138 in Job Growth and No. 180 in Cost of Doing Business. In this index, Forbes says “Peninsula Regional Medical Center employs more Salisbury residents than any other company, while Perdue Farms, the multi-national poultry corporation, is the largest employer headquartered in Salisbury.” It goes on to mention Salisbury University, Wor-Wic Community College and Sojourner Douglass College, along with “numerous parks and residents to enjoy, and the natural beauty of the area.”

"Life chances"

Salisbury University sociology professor Allan Pappas agrees the issue of quality of life is all in the approach.

“If you have an affinity for the water, we’re surrounded on three sides by water,” he said.

He added, however, that for those who don’t particularly enjoy long walks on the beach, this presents no real benefit. Likewise, he pointed out that while some residents would say we’re just a short drive to several major metropolitan cities, others might say we’re not quite close enough.

“It’s a matter of personal values and priorities,” he said.

Pappas said in his lectures, he generally defines quality of life as “life chances” or, more simply, “opportunity.”

He explained that before citizens can begin to define the quality of their lives in terms of wealth or success, they must first feel secure in their opportunities for basic health and well-being, personal safety and access to education.

“Once those things are managed, then we can talk about prosperity, then we can talk about success, in monetary terms,” he said.

Additionally, he pointed out that for someone who lives close to the beach but can't afford to feed their children, the standard quality of life indicators are trumped by the more serious realities.

The artist's perspective

Ask folks in Salisbury how they find the quality of life here from an arts perspective, and you'll hear some common answers:

- Arts, cultural and other events are at the core of quality of life.
- The city is home to a large group of dedicated and energetic volunteers who make things happen.
- There is a need to continue to grow the arts, via education, attracting more artists to the city and keeping home-grown artists on the Shore.
- The quality of life here is on an upward swing.

Oh, and a Salisbury version of the Torpedo Factory Art Center would help.

The Torpedo Factory, located on the waterfront in historic Old Town Alexandria, Va., features three floors of open studios and galleries where visitors can watch artists work and buy original art. Actually a former torpedo factory, the building houses studios for 82 artists, six galleries and The Art League School.

Marie Cavallaro of Salisbury is a huge supporter of the Torpedo Factory-like building idea.

Cavallaro is founder of the Cavallaro and Cleary Visual Arts Foundation, which each year holds an arts and crafts sale to raise money for arts scholarships for students on the Eastern Shore. The foundation also sponsors windows in the Powell Building on the downtown Plaza. The Gallery Under Glass gives people strolling on the Plaza a readily available glimpse of work by some of the young artists affiliated with the C/CART program.

But overall, Cavallaro said there is a lack of public space where visitors can view local visual artists practicing their craft, and to see and perhaps purchase their completed work. “We need more art in the windows downtown, and more featured artists,” she said.

Attracting more visitors and new residents to Salisbury has obvious benefits for the local economy.

“Art brings people together. Art is life,” Cavallaro said. “Without it, life is gray, if not black. There is color in all kinds of things here: writers, musicians, dancers. We have a lot here, we just need to bring it to the surface.”

Education is key

Education at all levels and for all ages is key in keeping the arts alive and well, and a vibrant arts community is a key to quality of life, said local artist Taylor.

"We are blessed with a school system that is so supportive of the arts," said Taylor, who was one of the first two original teachers in Wicomico County's Visual and Performing Arts Program. She is now retired after a teaching career that spanned 41 years, mostly in the VPA program, in addition to a few years as an instructor at Salisbury University.

Taylor noted the city is rich with opportunities for people to participate in or to attend performances of musical and theatrical events, through such groups as the Community Players of Salisbury, the Salisbury Symphony Orchestra and Salisbury Youth Orchestra, and the Salisbury Community Band. But this is not as much the case for local visual artists, such as painters and sculptors and potters.

Taylor is a fervent believer in the power of the arts and what it adds to quality of life. The arts were an important part of her recovery from breast cancer.

"When I couldn't do anything else, I did art in my bed. When I was sick and weak, it got me through. I'm not a whole person if I'm not doing it," she said. "It would be a sad place if people only worked, ate and slept,"

There are bright and shining art spots in Salisbury: the VPA program, Art Institute & Gallery of Salisbury, the Salisbury Wicomico Arts Council, Community Players, the various music and theater programs at Salisbury University and the Ward Museum of Wildfowl Art.

"We need to create an environment where young people graduating in the arts will want to stay here," Taylor said. "It would be icing on the cake if older established artists wanted to move here, too."

Visible signs

Some signs the arts are beginning to thrive in downtown Salisbury, according to Ray Vorus, chairman of the Salisbury Arts & Entertainment District, include:

- A new blue heron mural for the City Center building downtown is nearing completion and is expected to be installed and dedicated next month.
- Third Friday, now in its fifth year, is thriving. "The crowd at 3rd Friday is well into the thousands," Vorus said.
- The Salisbury Dance Academy is relocating to a building downtown, a site that stood empty for years.
- A new event, the New Year's Eve ball drop downtown, had a stunning turnout, and is slated to return to ring in 2015.

In addition, after years of roadblocks, various arts-related projects have started moving extremely fast, Vorus said.

The old firehouse downtown has a new owner, and there is talk of a portion of it being used as a site for arts performances and instruction, he said. The former Feldman's building is also getting new life: Part of the building has been torn down, remaining sections are being renovated and space is being added.

In addition, construction continues on the River's Edge Apartments and Studio for the Arts, located on Fitzwater Street, near the marina. The plan is for artists to have the first opportunity to secure an apartment, which includes room for a studio. Also planned is space for a main gallery and an outdoor venue for concerts and other events.

"We'll see a lot of people coming to Salisbury, and that's good for business," he said. The hope is to get artists who lived here before and who went to school here, and would be interested in coming back here to live. He predicted it would encourage people to stay in Salisbury.

"That will be better for everybody," he said. "New artists in the area would expand the opportunities for people who enjoy arts of all kinds."

Another major player

Gary W. Mackes is director of the Wicomico County Department of Recreation, Parks and Tourism, another major player in the quality of life field.

According to the annual report of the Wicomico County Department of Recreation, Parks and Tourism, in 2013, there were 250 different recreation activities offered. These attracted more than 14,600 registrants and resulted in 332,000 visitations.

Recreational activities include adult and youth sports programs, after-school programs, ballroom and belly dance classes, boating safety and bridge classes.

Fees are kept low via a "pay-to-play" model for activities: user fees are charged for programs and services in which residents participate. According to the department's annual report for 2013, making recreation programs more affordable by phasing out these fees is a priority.

"It's all about affordability," Mackes said.

Additionally, the number of events held at the Wicomico Youth & Civic Center is growing: A total of 777 events were held in 2012, versus 881 in 2013. Among the highlights last year: poodle specialty and dog shows, a circus, Sesame Street Live, Disney on Ice, wrestling and a concert featuring Matchbox Twenty and the Goo Goo Dolls.

The biggest grossing event ever held at the Civic Center was a concert featuring comedian Bill Cosby.

In addition to entertainment, the Civic Center is often the Shore venue of choice for trade shows, high school graduations and religious conferences. But the competition for hosting entertainment events is growing. For entertainment events, there are 24 venues within a half-day drive, and Salisbury is competing for that audience, Mackes said.

"We want the Civic Center to be the place to come to for these events," he said.

To achieve that goal, modernization is needed at the facility, which was built in 1959, then rebuilt in 1980 following a fire.

The start of 2014 has already seen the addition of black drapes that can be drawn in front of the high-riser seating, to create a more comfortable and pleasing half-house environment for smaller shows and events. By Thanksgiving, Mackes hopes there will be substantial progress made in renovating the box office, lobby and vestibule, in addition to the modernization of the corridor walls, floors and ceilings at the Civic Center.

Also on the agenda is replacing the permanent seating and a new food court.

"We need these things for people to come here — and come back the next year," Mackes said. When people attend shows and concerts, "they want (the venue) to be something modern, they want modern and new and shiny."

Growth and modernization are also on the agenda for area parks.

Wicomico County is home to more than 75 parks, including 15 parks and playgrounds in Salisbury. The largest parks are WinterPlace Park and Equestrian Center (377 acres); Pemberton Historical Park (262 acres); and the Henry S. Parker Athletic Complex (41 acres).

Offerings through the tourism branch of the department are seeing success in attracting visitors to Salisbury and adding dollars to the local economy with large festivals, including Pork in the Park National BBQ Cookoff and BBQ Festival (May 9-11 at WinterPlace Park); the Fifth annual Good Beer Festival (Oct. 11-12, Pemberton Historical Park) and Autumn Wine Festival (Oct. 18 and 19, Pemberton Historical Park).

An example of the power of these events to attract visitors to Salisbury is the fact that 30 percent to 60 percent of people attending these events are from out of town, Mackes said.

"In today's society, there are numerous options where people can live, as people are willing to commute for work. Many seek communities that have a regionally recognized park system and an interesting portfolio of programs and special events because they are attractive places to live and raise a family," Mackes said. "Wicomico meets these criteria, and it is my hope it continues to invest in its quality-of-life programming."

No place like home

For some residents, quality of life can't be measured by the number of boutiques, art galleries or events.

Leah Sell, 26, works at Roly Poly in Seagull Square. Born and raised here, she has lived three other places. Her fiance's job as a construction supervisor requires travel, and he is currently located in Arkansas, but "I moved here, rather than Arkansas."

"Ultimately, it's home. I can't really put my finger on it," she said. "There's no other place like it."

But, she acknowledged, there is something she'd like to see changed in Salisbury: "They could fix the potholes."

Thoughts on this story? Email them to newshub@DelmarvaNow.com.