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First Fridays Artswalk gets financial lift from Berkshire Money Management

By Tony Dobrowolski, Berkshire Eagle Staff

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PITTSFIELD — The intersection of art and commerce in downtown Pittsfield recently took place at the corner of North and Bradford streets.

When the city held its inaugural First Fridays Artswalk through downtown Pittsfield in May, a woman who had viewed the objects on display at the Aerus Electrolux store at 383 North St. returned the next day and bought a vacuum cleaner.

“It’s good for business to participate in things that are downtown,” said store owner Real Gadoury.

With help from the private sector, it looks like the Artswalk, which occurs on the first Friday of every month, will stick around for awhile.

On the eve of tonight’s fifth Artswalk event, the organizers announced on Thursday at the Ferrin Gallery that Berkshire Money Management of Pittsfield has signed on as the event’s lead sponsor, and has contributed \$4,000 that will enable the project to continue through the winter and into next year.

Funding from sponsors and partners helps supports the event’s marketing and outreach efforts, and an honorarium for Artswalk manager Leo Mazzeo, who helped found the event.

“The reason we decided to help out is because there’s a psychic reward to it,” said Allen Harris, the firm’s president and chief investment officer. “It feels good to help others and a cause.

“While I enjoy helping a cause, I also know that it helps my business,” he said.

The Artswalk has other sponsors, including Berkshire Health Systems, the Berkshire Bank Foundation and The Berkshire Eagle, but Harris said he hoped his financial commitment would result in additional investment from the private sector.

“I come with a message to other Berkshire businesses,” he said. “That is to join me.”

First Friday’s Artswalk co-founder Mary McGinnis, who owns two small downtown businesses, said Berkshire Money Management’s decision to participate “came out of the woodwork.”

“We can’t thank them enough,” she said. “We’ve stayed up all night trying to figure out how to keep this thing going.”

Organizers wouldn’t say just how long Berkshire Money Management’s contribution will keep Artswalk going through next year. The event’s organizers have also applied for a \$10,000 grant from the Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation in Sheffield.

“We’re still finishing the budget,” said Cultural Development Director Megan Whilden. “[But] we’re absolutely committed to doing it through this year and through 2013.”

Aerus Electrolux isn’t the only downtown business that has benefited from Artswalk so far. Citing data collected from two-thirds of the Artswalk participants, McGinnis said the direct economic impact from the first four events is \$40,000 in the sales of artwork and other items.

Mayor Daniel L. Bianchi said First Friday’s Artswalk has “livened up downtown.”

“You just don’t walk next door to get refill bags for your Electrolux,” Bianchi said, referring to Gadoury’s business. “Now there’s art over there.”

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If you go . . .

What: First Fridays Artswalk
 Where: Downtown Pittsfield
 When: Tonight, 5-8
 Highlights: Grier Horner Art Show at BCC Intermodal Gallery, 1 Columbus Ave., 6 p.m.; Artist talk with Maggie Mailer at Ferrin Gallery, 437 North St., 6:30 p.m.; Art shows, live jazz at Crawford Square, 137 North St.
 Admission: All events free and open to the public.
 Walk map: Online at firstfridaysartswalk.com.
 Information: Leo Mazzeo via info@firstfridaysartswalk.com.