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Haywood Street Congregation Withdraws Proposal for BCTDA Grant

ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA (March 6, 2018) – Following an announcement by the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority (BCTDA) last week that it would delay action on a \$72,500 grant to Haywood Street Congregation (HSC), the HSC Board of Directors has voted to withdraw its funding proposal and exit the process.

According to executive director Laura Kirby, the HSC Board wanted to stop the BCTDA from incurring additional legal fees related to a challenge from the Wisconsin-Based Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding constitutionality of the grant.

"We are confident that the Haywood Street Fresco will bring new visitors to Asheville and that our proposed partnership does not violate the establishment clause of the constitution," Kirby said in a letter to Explore Asheville President and CEO Stephanie Pace Brown. "Even so, our Board has determined that the most faithful response we can make at this time is to withdraw our request for funding."

Haywood Street had submitted a proposal for funding from the BCTDA's Tourism Product Development Fund (TPDF) during its 2017 competitive grant cycle. In October, HSC received notice of a grant award to support the production of a 28 ft. wide by 11 ft. tall fresco on the central wall of its sanctuary. Before the funding contract was drawn up, the FFRF called on the BCTDA to rescind the grant, suggesting that it would be an inappropriate use of taxpayer funds. Since then, processing of the grant has been on hold.

The TPDF is supplied by hotel tax revenue and its purpose is to reinvest tourism dollars into capital projects that have the potential to increase overnight lodging in the county. The experience of other regional frescoes offers evidence of this project's potential value to the tourism economy in Asheville. In Ashe County, where three Ben Long frescoes are located in two Episcopal churches, many old homes have been converted into bed-and-breakfasts to accommodate the thousands of people who visit each year from all across the country.

BCTDA attorney Carleton Metcalf responded to the FFRF on February 2nd, 2018, stating that the grant was not in violation of the constitution and does in fact meet the criteria for a TPDF grant. The FFRF rejected Metcalf's argument and threatened further legal action.

Kirby is confident that there is a path to funding the project through private donations, and affirms its commitment to the project and its partnership with BCTDA -- with or without the grant. "We will continue to view Explore Asheville and the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority as partners," she says,

“because we recognize that the fresco, once complete, will be of interest to visitors. Our intention is for this project to be public art, available to all who have interest in viewing it.”

Haywood’s fresco will feature faces of real people in Asheville, including many who are homeless or have experienced homelessness in this city. Its message will parallel the church’s belief system. Haywood Street’s founding pastor, Rev. Brian Combs, puts it this way: “The New Testament narrates a God who abandons heaven to take up residence as a homeless man on earth, who loiters on dirty corners, who breaks bread with outcasts, who touches the untouchable, who loves cherishing what has been discarded by the world.”

According to the church’s website, “The life-sized mural at Haywood Street will offer the message that God continues to show up in everyday life among the unhoused and the housed, the poor and poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, and the hungry.” The painting will depict the scripture known as “The Beatitudes,” which include eight declarations of blessedness offered by Jesus.

Combs says, “This scripture reminds us of God’s heightened concern for the poor and a value system that says the last shall be first. It is this value system and understanding of gospel truth that informs the Haywood Street ministries. Not only will the last be first at Haywood Street, they will feast at the banquet table surrounded by loving family.”

The total cost of the project is expected to be close to \$200,000, none of which will be diverted from Haywood Street’s core programs that provide food, clothing and medical respite care for individuals experiencing homelessness.

For more information or to donate visit www.haywoodstreet.org/fresco.

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